

**The Aesthetic of Empiricism:  
Self, Knowledge and Reality in Mid-Victorian  
Prose**

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I declare that the following work is all my own, and that all sources have duly and accurately been acknowledged.

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## Abstract

Long ago, in *Keywords*, Raymond Williams remarked with some justification that “*Empirical* and the related *empiricism* are now in some contexts among the most difficult words in the language.” That difficulty has yet to be fully recognised or elaborated by contemporary criticism. In an era when discontinuity, difference and heterogeneity have become privileged tenets of criticism, empiricism has come to be regarded as the other of contemporary thought and synonymous with positivism or objectivism. Yet empiricism has rarely, if ever, had this philosophical implication; Dr Johnson, we recall, kicked the stone precisely to expose empiricism’s baroque falsifications of commonsense. Focusing on the mid-nineteenth century, this thesis argues that far from initiating a crude representationalism, empiricism predicated its search for knowledge on a profound instability, one embodied within the textual language through which it sought its articulation. That instability stemmed from the dominant view that the self was constructed in and through experience, and perforce restlessly alterable or unfinished, while also being central to the methodology of observation underlying the empiricists’ view of the world. The contingent self was conceived simultaneously as the route towards knowledge and its obstacle. In the work of John Ruskin, G. H. Lewes, George Eliot, Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer the principle of relationality consistently shapes their view of reality and their epistemological drive. By considering a variety of their writing—philosophical, literary, psychological, scientific, critical—it will be argued that ‘empiricism’ provides a useful rubric for their common, primary, deep-seated epistemological impulse. In various self-conscious ways, their arguments unfold in destabilising

narrative forms, dramatising the principles of limitation and provisionality so crucial to their meaning. Rather like the reality they attempt to describe, works like Bain's *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855) or Lewes's *Problems of Life and Mind* (1874-9) adopt a sprawling, proliferating structure which seems to register a restless struggle to unify knowledge, and by dramatising this resistance to the synthesising will they acknowledge in and through narrative itself the impossibility of some perfect (and therefore fixed) organisation. The many volumes and reworked editions in which mid-Victorian empiricism appeared provide formidable material evidence of this revisability principle, incorporating the theme of multiplicity at a narrative level. Novels like *Middlemarch* (1871-2), to take a famous example, not only make connective structures (networks, webs, tangles) a way of describing the morphology of communal life, they assimilate this logic of association into their narrative method. In all cases, associational possibility becomes encoded in form. After historically retracing these questions to the figure of David Hume, subsequent chapters explore different aspects of narrative and knowledge in these writers: the aesthetic of realism, the problems of perception, the knowing body, and the negotiation of relativism. To the extent that this relational epistemology shapes these works—whether multi-volume treatises, novels or periodical essays—it might be thought of as determining the aesthetic of empiricism.

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# Introduction

For life is but a dream whose shapes return,  
Some frequently, some seldom, some by night  
And some by day, some night and day: we learn,  
The while all change and many vanish quite,  
In their recurrence with recurrent changes  
A certain seeming order; where this ranges  
We count things real; such is memory's might.

—James Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night*<sup>1</sup>

Is't real that I see?

—William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*<sup>2</sup>

In *The Physiology of Common Life* (1859), G. H. Lewes relates the story of a suicidal Frenchman who decides to incorporate his own death into a scientific experiment.<sup>3</sup> The disillusioned man, M. Déal, we are told, seeks to remedy an unremarkable life by dying a distinguished death. To this end, he resolves to suffocate himself on the fumes of burning charcoal while recording in a narrative the experience of his asphyxiation, imagining that the written testimony will be “in the interest of science” and so confer, albeit posthumously, the intellectual dignity he craves. Accordingly, as Lewes relates, Déal orchestrates his suicide with precision: “I place a lamp, a candle, and a watch on my table, and commence the ceremony. It is a quarter past 10; I have just lighted the stove; the charcoal burns

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<sup>1</sup> James Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night*. (1880) Edinburgh: Canongate, 1993, p. 29; I.15-21.

<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*. eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 882; V.iii.309.

<sup>3</sup> G. H. Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life*. (2 vols) London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1859, I, pp. 346-49.

feebly.” Having begun the macabre experiment, he then records his deterioration at strict ten-minute intervals. Soon a thick vapour fills the room, stimulating a violent headache and an agitated pulse; as the effects intensify, there is acute stomach pain, followed by an assault of “strange ideas” and what he calls the “symptoms of madness.” Eventually, after transcribing his experience faithfully for some forty-five minutes, his capacities finally fail him: “I can scarcely write... My sight is troubled... My lamp is going out... I did not think it would be such agony to die.” Next morning, Déal’s body is found slumped on the floor, his suicidal narrative left on the writing table for posterity, as intended. Upon hearing of his death, however, his lover becomes inconsolable; overcome by grief, she decides to hurl herself into the “dark and sullen” waters of the Seine and join him in suicide. By the following day both corpses are lying exposed in the city’s “dreadful Morgue.”<sup>4</sup>

Lewes relates this gloomy case to illustrate a fragile fact upon which human life depends: the “slight exchange of gases” that constitutes normal respiration. The two suicides, he says, demonstrate this most basic of biological realities, for in each case death is caused by the respiratory process being interrupted, either by noxious fumes or rushing river-water. His story is meant to remind us that life, in all its shades of existential (and tragic) complexity, ultimately comes down to a simple substitution of carbon dioxide and oxygen which can be represented in an abstract way, far from the world of human deeds and desires. Yet, while his purpose here is to uncover the hidden mechanisms sustaining life from moment to moment—to unveil them, as it were<sup>5</sup>—Lewes cannot at the same time avoid questioning the possibility of a pure or neutral language of physiology. His story invites, perhaps knowingly, anything but narrow anatomical curiosity, for its appeal has little

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<sup>4</sup> Lewes, *Physiology*, pp. 347-48.

<sup>5</sup> “If for a moment we could with the bodily eye see into the frame of man, as with the microscope we see into the transparent frames of some simpler animals, what a spectacle would be unveiled!” Lewes, *Physiology*, I, p. 271. Kate Flint discusses this bodily sense of unveiling in “Blood, Bodies and *The Lifted Veil*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 51, 4, 1997, pp. 455-473. The metaphor of unveiling in mid-Victorian empiricist writing will be returned to throughout this study, as it is deployed with crucial but ambiguous significance at both aesthetic and epistemological levels.

directly to do with science. Far more fascinating than the dying man's respiratory apparatus is the compelling drama of the case—that is, the unsettling contrast of rational science and irrational desire that conspire in his death, the tragicomic sense of discrepancy between the carefully arranged suicidal props and the destructive urge behind their co-ordination, and the widening tragic circle which claims the life of his lover, to whose drowning we respond with inevitable sympathy rather than a cold, clinical diagnosis. In effect, the story's scientific meaning is hugely overdetermined by its own dramatic structure as a narrative, obscuring and even undermining the significance of the factual physiology supposedly at its core.

This story—brief, arresting, multi-layered all at once—offers us (and Lewes's Victorian reader) a representation of a scientific practice, and more broadly an image of empiricism. The experiment described in the story follows an almost fanatical commitment to the idea that knowledge begins in the direct experience of observable reality (Déal supposes that the knowledge of asphyxiation he seeks should derive solely from the testimony of the unaided senses). In fact, its simple narrative setting and sparse detail make the rudimentary empiricist acts of observing and transcribing the focus of the story. Its 'plot' is the unfolding of an empiricism pared down to its most basic and essential elements, where Déal—the dedicated copyist of experience—plays out his role in the simple epistemological drama to the point of self-sacrifice. But, as a narrative about knowledge and the drive to know, its consequences are shown to be anything but simple or straightforward. With remarkable brevity, the story manages to invoke empiricism's surprising potential for arriving at uncertainty, contradiction and absurdity. For as it begins to share a kinship with autobiography—a writing of the sensory self—the empiricism dramatised in the story turns to reflect upon the conditions of its own possibility. No matter how strongly he wills to stand outside the events he experiences, Déal-the-narrator must move ever-closer to the suicidal self over which he claims authority, culminating in a final, fatal union of perceiver



and perceived. This convergence of selves marks the impossibility of disinterestedness, the collapse of narrative stability and reliability. Yet, at the same time, this instability lends the scene its legitimacy, for without it the whole enterprise would lose its meaning as an experimental moment. That is to say, without Déal's inherently unstable point of view, the experiment would lack sufficient purchase on experience, as no other observer than Déal could inhabit his singular phenomenology of dying.<sup>6</sup> What guarantees him his unique observational powers, and thus validates the testimony, is his unique relation to his own death, which by definition nobody else could undergo or submit to on his behalf. What compromises his perspective on the event also, paradoxically, authenticates the kind of knowledge it produces. In this short empiricist drama, narrative unreliability becomes a necessary condition of knowing.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, this kind of uncertainty became a crucial feature of British empiricist epistemology, and one embodied within the textual language through which it sought its articulation. As in Lewes's odd story, where it manifests itself as a question of narrative structure and authority, the uncertainty flowing from epistemologies grounded in the concept of experience meant that mid-Victorian empiricism predicated its search for knowledge on a profound instability. That instability stemmed from the dominant view that the self was constructed in and through experience, and perforce restlessly alterable or unfinished, while also being central to the methodology of observation underlying the empiricists' view of the world. The contingent self was conceived simultaneously as the route towards knowledge and its obstacle. Knowledge without such a self would be, quite literally, unthinkable; equally,

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<sup>6</sup> As Jacques Derrida has argued, the aporetic moment of death belongs uniquely to the subject—"no one can die in my place or in the place of the other"—yet that which is named as 'my death' can never be subject to an experience that would properly be mine, possessed as/in its unfolding eventfulness. See Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dubtoit, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 22. In a slightly different but relevant discussion of the death/knowledge paradox in the nineteenth century, George Levine argues that dying has been implied ever since Plato in the West's narrative of knowing: "Dying is one consequence of the Faustian pact for knowledge: death both for the aspiring knower, and for the world in which things get known." George Levine, *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England*. London: University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 15.



knowledge passing through the sensuous intelligence of an observer must always be subject to the limitations imposed by the observer's position. While observation based on immediate sensory access to reality would seem to furnish knowledge, it also has the effect of binding the knower in some determinative way to place, perspective and personality.

Mid-Victorian writers in the empiricist tradition were committed to the classic experiential doctrine—that “experience is the sole origin of knowledge,” to use Herbert Spencer's phrase—while being increasingly aware of the problematic nature of observation itself.<sup>7</sup> To be an empiricist was at once to place trust in the immediacy of one's encounter with reality, and also to seek a description of reality which might hold beyond the vagaries and limitations of personal point of view. As this contradiction implies, the relationship between observer and observed, knower and object, was thus understood to be radically unstable. But it was not assumed by empiricist writers that this instability could simply be resolved. They did not envision a way of knowing that involved somehow neutralising the contingencies of spectatorship, or attaining some flawlessly transparent perspective on observable reality, or eliminating human error from practices of scientific observation, for example by using magnifying aids and other visual technologies.<sup>8</sup> The deficiencies of the eye were not the primary question. It was not just a case of applying oneself more and more diligently to the business of seeing until an accurate view of reality was achieved—even if, as George Levine argues, the act of observation did not take place in a moral vacuum and often entailed an ethics of knowing.<sup>9</sup> Often, in fact,

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<sup>7</sup> Herbert Spencer, “The Genesis of Science” (1854) in *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative*. (3 vols) London: Williams and Norgate, 1901, II, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> As Kate Flint suggests in her fine recent study, rather than having the simple effect of increasing the accuracy of observation, the development of visual technologies like the microscope and telescope during the nineteenth century tended in fact to expand, multiply and problematise observable reality more than simply contain it. See Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> He argues persuasively that the scientific ideal of disinterestness, which arose so forcefully in Victorian culture, required an ethical move whereby personal interests were put aside, especially in order that the amorality of the world be faced. Consequently, in the nineteenth-century “the power to observe accurately becomes a moral as well as an epistemological virtue,” Levine suggests, such that “religious forms of resurrection are repeated in epistemological success deriving from the denial of the self who seeks the knowledge in the first place.” Levine, *Dying to Know*, p. 6.

mid-nineteenth-century writing celebrated the incompleteness of our vision. As the narrator comments in George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life*: "Thank heaven, then, that a little illusion is left to us, to enable us to be useful and agreeable—that we don't know exactly what our friends think of us—that the world is not made of looking-glass, to show us just the figure we are making, and just what is going on behind our backs!"<sup>10</sup> To see things as they are not, as this passage suggests, might entail its own ethical and practical virtues.

Rather than tending to assume that observation was in principle correctible, empiricists like Eliot did not think it was possible (or even desirable) to rectify or perfect perception, because the instability was understood in terms of an epistemological problem, not merely a practical one. For them, all human knowledge is always necessarily circumscribed, conditioned by context, and conceived in terms of relationship. One of the supremely important, overriding, reiterated themes of empiricist discourse between 1840 and 1880, in its many varied forms, is the idea that at all knowledge implies relational structures. In the work of John Ruskin, G. H. Lewes, George Eliot, Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer—to take a representative group of writers, not an exhaustive list—the idea or principle which consistently shapes their view of reality, and shapes the writing in which that view materialises, is that of relationality. In its simplest form, this pervasive theory said that we know things only by having them brought into relation with consciousness, that knowledge of any kind means taking up an angle to the world or occupying a relative position. As the critic Christopher Herbert has said, "[t]o apprehend reality in a distinctively modern mode came in this period to mean, in effect, apprehending it relativistically."<sup>11</sup> Ruskin, for example, asserted in *Modern Painters* IV that "our happiness as thinking beings must depend on our

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<sup>10</sup> George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life*. (1857) ed. Jennifer Gribble, London: Penguin, 1998, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Herbert, *Victorian Relativity: Radical Thought and Scientific Discovery*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2001, p. 3.

being content to accept only partial knowledge.”<sup>12</sup> His phrasing, here, explicitly connecting thinking with partiality, expresses a relativistic commitment to epistemology akin to that captured in Herbert Spencer’s memorably bold slogan (borrowed from the Scottish philosopher William Hamilton): “to think is to condition”—by which he meant that the kind of activity we label as thought always has, by default, exclusively relational implications. Knowledge, Spencer argued, entails “the antithesis of a subject and object of thought, known only in correlation.”<sup>13</sup> For Spencer and these other mid-century writers, it was held that partiality and relativity are vital preconditions of thought and knowledge, not signs of mediation which their epistemologies sought to eliminate in the quest for some ideally indifferent, objective, judgment-free process of representation.

Alexander Bain, an influential moderniser of the traditional doctrine of associationist psychology, declared in this radical spirit that we “know only relations; an absolute, properly speaking, is not compatible with our knowing faculty.”<sup>14</sup> For Bain, conscious life itself could be defined as an incessant stream of differences, an unrelenting cognitive experience of contrast and comparison amongst rapidly coursing mental impressions. Without the feeling of difference, he argued, the mind does not consciously live. In *The Emotions and the Will* (1859), for example, he explains that the “basis or fundamental peculiarity of the intellect is Discrimination, or the feeling of difference between consecutive, or co-existing, impressions”:

Nothing more fundamental can possibly be assigned as the defining mark of intelligence... When I am differently affected by two colours, two sounds, two odours, two weights, or by a taste as compared with a touch or a sound, I am

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<sup>12</sup> John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*. (39 vols) eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, London: George Allen, 1903-12, VI, p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert Spencer, *First Principles*. (1862) London: Williams and Norgate, 6<sup>th</sup> edn., 1904, p. 55. Both phrases are taken by Spencer from Hamilton’s essay “The Philosophy of the Unconditioned,” sizeable passages of which are incorporated liberally into the fabric of Spencer’s own text.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*. (1859) London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1865, p. 589.

intellectually conscious. By such distinctiveness of feeling am I prepared, in the first instance, for imbibing that various experience implied in the term knowledge, and essential even to the lowest forms of voluntary action... We are awake, alive, mentally alert, under the discriminative exercise, and accordingly may be said to be conscious.<sup>15</sup>

The rhetorical stress falling here on linkages, doublings and differences—on the realm existing *between* elements in the mind rather than on the elements themselves—quickly establishes the relational direction of Bain's thinking. The passage, wholly characteristic of Bain's written style, pictures consciousness as a constant dispersal of energy into connective and contrastive activity, wherein mental ideas derive value or meaning only by being brought into relation with a wider horizon of further ideas. To be intellectually alive means being forced into the shifting space of differential experience, where identities are not prescribed, fixed or intrinsic but relationally governed and negotiated. We must experience the discriminative feeling arising from two varied shades of colour if we are ever to arrive at, say, an idea of the colour red. And this emphatically expansive image of cognition has important epistemological ramifications: Bain's theory of knowledge, as we shall see, turns crucially on the relativistic psychology worked out in his dynamically integrated vision of mind and body.

This characteristic trend towards the relational in mid-Victorian thought led empiricists to hold increasingly sophisticated views of the nature of 'reality' and its representation. If our knowledge claims must be made ultimately referable to sense experience, then self, knowledge and reality soon threaten to shade into one another. Their boundaries become drastically difficult to draw, as the categories interpenetrate and blur. Reality, to the empiricist, becomes bound up inextricably with its perception: how can a 'real' world be disentangled from subjectivity? In what sense is the world more than the sum of its interpretations? Can a self be

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<sup>15</sup> Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, p. 566.

cleanly distinguished from its own perceptual acts? Does the accretion of mental data—feelings, impressions, ideas, and so on—have a fixed centre, or might they comprise merely a Humean bundle, an illusion of unity? These were pressing, urgent questions for mid-Victorian culture, a culture that it has become customary to consider in terms of the related ideals of realism and objectivity. Empiricism, it has to be remembered, certainly did not automatically initiate or undergird a naive representationalism. Instead, it troubled the neat ontologies of self and world implicit in such a view. As Bain put it, “the object, or extended world, is inseparable from our cognitive faculties.”<sup>16</sup> In effect, this position denied there were any simple external facts of reality. Outer and inner realms mutually construct one another, somewhat arbitrarily. Spencer held a concomitant view. “No facts whatever are presented to our senses uncombined with other facts,” he realised, for example.<sup>17</sup> Our sense of the real rather comes about in the complex assimilations, associations and mutations of past and present ideas.

The stanza from James Thomson’s poem *The City of Dreadful Night* suggests as much. First published in its entirety in 1880, Thomson wrote the poem during the 1870s, the decade of *Daniel Deronda*, Lewes’s *Problems of Life and Mind*, new editions of major works by Bain and Spencer, and Ruskin’s later, darker miscellaneous writings. It looks, forward, however, in its richly bleak way, to the modernity of *The Waste Land*. Indeed, the stanza excerpted above seems to make an argument for grasping reality as a kind of sustained psychological effect, mixing memory and desire. Experience is likened to a sequence of shadowy forms, relentlessly shifting, combining, disappearing and returning. Thompson’s lines heavily stress these movements of recurrence, revival and interaction. It seems that our impressions, once they consort with previously formed ideas and memories in this dynamic way, can no longer be isolated from a consuming swell of

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<sup>16</sup> Alexander Bain, *Logic*. (2 vols) London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1873, II, p. 277.

<sup>17</sup> Spencer, “The Genesis of Science,” p. 65.

associational energy. Where order can be found among them—a certain *seeming* order, not an intrinsic or directly referential pattern—they acquire (one senses somewhat arbitrarily) the term ‘real’. The whole poem interrogates the ‘reality’ of the London it wanders through, moving fluidly between different modes of subjective apprehension, from the dreamy, the historical and the mythical, to the knowingly aesthetic. Ever shifting, the threshold of outer and inner seems at times perilously close to dissolution. Even the material solidity of *Melencolia’s* statue (“The bronze colossus of a wingéd woman”), whose image closes the poem, seems to lack a decisive or defined exteriority.<sup>18</sup> A key part of the poem’s effect, and one source of its famed pessimism, is the threat this poses in turn to the integrity of the empirical self: “When this poor tragic-farce has palled us long, / Why actors and spectators do we stay?”<sup>19</sup> Yet we *do* stay, the poem suggests, because perspective itself—however fragile its grip on the world out there—nonetheless continues to provide the only viable resource for conceiving of reality, even if weakly or woefully.

The speaker’s anxieties filling out this despairing vision indicate the distance Thomson has travelled from a simply rationalisable model of the real, and from stable narrative point of view, and thus it is tempting to read *The City of Dreadful Night* as pointing presciently towards literary modernism. Rightly or not, we might be inclined to connect its mood and method more to T. S. Eliot than George Eliot.<sup>20</sup> But our rationale for reading Thomson in protomodernist terms, rather than in Victorian ones, would most likely involve the belief that opening these representational and philosophical questions was untypical of the nineteenth century. It would depend on our assuming that the development of sceptically-inflected, perspectivist, relational lines of thought was unVictorian. Similar issues of knowability were, however, precisely those at stake in empiricist writing in

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<sup>18</sup> Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night*, p. 66; XXI.6.

<sup>19</sup> Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night*, p. 66; XIX.22-23.

<sup>20</sup> Edwin Morgan’s introduction to the poem rightfully notes the 1874 correspondence between Thomson and George Eliot, in which she made clear her admiration for his work. Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night*, p. 14.



Thomson's own lifetime, and his poem's account of the perceiving mind resonates strongly with the psychological theory of the 1860s and 1870s. But literary criticism, in particular, has tended to see the propensity to ask these sorts of searching, critical or radical questions of reality, and of its representation, as almost exclusive functions of modernist culture.

One does not have to look very far to find instances of this tendency. Brian McHale, for example, in attempting to distinguish between the cultural paradigm or "dominant" at work within modernist and postmodernist literatures, decides that "the dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological." His rationale for this is that the modernist text "foregrounds such epistemological themes as the accessibility and circulation of knowledge, the different structuring imposed on the 'same' knowledge by different minds, and the problem of 'unknowability' or the limits of knowledge."<sup>21</sup> However true of Joyce or Faulkner, this description would serve just as well as a rubric for the nineteenth-century texts that constituted an earlier cultural formation which this study is calling the discourse of empiricism. McHale, in fact, is unwittingly apt in his phrasing: the term 'unknowability' (in scare-quotes as though daringly *recherché*) takes us back directly to Herbert Spencer's *First Principles* (1862), which opens with a lengthy reflection entitled 'The Unknowable' and deals logically and learnedly with the theoretical problem of the limits of knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

Writers like McHale follow influential Marxist critics like Fredric Jameson in identifying modernism as a historical moment when Western culture confronted, ambivalently, its loss of the possibility of representing totality—not just social totality, but, more philosophically, the totalised concept conceived inside epistemological discourse of the world as uniform, continuous and integrated. For Jameson, modernist art and philosophy "tend to confirm the idea that there is something quite naïve, in a sense quite profoundly *unrealistic*... about the notion

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<sup>21</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1996, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, pp. 3-96.

that reality is out there simply, quite objective and independent of us, and that knowing it involves the relatively unproblematical process of getting an adequate picture of it into our heads.”<sup>23</sup> If modernism arrives announcing that “the whole is the false,” in Theodore Adorno’s phrase, the implication must be that these broadly objectivist or mimetic assumptions held sway in the period immediately before it.<sup>24</sup> For many, indeed, it is against such a background that modernism’s fractured epistemologies and estranging formal literary ventures demand to be understood. Colin McCabe, for example, invokes this now familiar historical trajectory in his influential *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (1978), which takes the exhilarating textual self-consciousness of Joyce not just as a way of demonstrating the eclipse of the Victorian novel by newer modes of twentieth-century fiction, but as evidence for the much larger inference that within modernist culture “[t]ruth is no longer correspondence but struggle.”<sup>25</sup> Modernism, as McCabe sees it, ushers in a profoundly new epistemological universe.<sup>26</sup> Victorian realists like George Eliot, who propose and appear to enact in fiction a “simple unravelling of the real,” belong to a distant, seemingly unrelated time or phase of cultural history, if McCabe’s teleology is to be accepted.<sup>27</sup> The emergence of the modernist scepticism valorised throughout his reading of Joyce seems to lack any meaningful prehistory in the ideas and debates of the previous half-century, which in fact had precisely begun to register an increasingly widespread acceptance of differential notions of ‘reality’.

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<sup>23</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism” in *The Jameson Reader*. eds. Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p.177

<sup>24</sup> Theodore Adorno quoted in Stephen Baker, *The Fiction of Postmodernity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> Colin McCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*. London: Macmillan, 1978, p. 38.

<sup>26</sup> “Whereas in Joyce’s texts the division between signifier and signified becomes an area in which the reader is in (and at) play-producing meaning through his or her own activity, in George Eliot’s texts this division is elided at the level of the metalanguage.” McCabe, *James Joyce*, p. 35. Other critics of modernism, implicitly or otherwise, share this kind of view. Derek Attridge, for example, offers a more refined version of McCabe’s argument that nonetheless retains its basic convictions: “Rather than an absolute division between the Real and the Text, along which we are obliged to tread a perilous path, rather than an irreversible progression from pure signification to an apprehension of Necessity, we learn from Joyce an appreciation of *difference*, which resists the narrative of progress and the claims of transcendence.” Derek Attridge, *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 84.

<sup>27</sup> McCabe, *James Joyce*, p. 19.



This thesis considers a variety of writing from the middle decades of the nineteenth century—philosophical, literary, psychological, scientific, critical—which it gathers together (in a necessarily flexible fashion) under the term empiricism. It does so precisely in order to identify all of them with a common, primary, deep-seated epistemological impulse. That impulse works itself out in a variety of ways in the diverse body of texts written by Ruskin, Eliot, Lewes, Bain and Spencer, but in an important sense they share a commitment to an experiential theory of knowledge which, as it intersects with distinctively Victorian issues such as evolutionary theory and nervous physiology, becomes more prone to ask critical questions of the kind Brian McHale outlines—to ask what it means to know, and to strive for knowledge from an always-limited consciousness, and to be situated yet aspire to see more reality than one perspective allows, and to experience *not* knowing. These writers display a relentless fascination with such questions. Reflecting on the problematic construction of reality constitutes one of their principal drives; epistemology preoccupies them. It also determines the texture of the narratives themselves. In various self-conscious ways, the language embodying their arguments for a relational epistemology unfolds in destabilising narrative forms, dramatising the principles of limitation and provisionality which are so crucial to its meaning.

Rather like the reality they attempt to describe, works like Bain's *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855) or Lewes's *Problems of Life and Mind* (1874-9) adopt a sprawling, proliferating structure which seems to register a restless struggle to unify knowledge, and by dramatising this resistance to the synthesising will they acknowledge in and through narrative itself the impossibility of some perfect (and therefore fixed) organisation. The many volumes and reworked editions in which mid-Victorian empiricism appeared to its readers provided formidable material evidence of this revisability principle. In the voluminous textual corpus constituted by Ruskin, Lewes, Bain and Spencer, questions or problems tend frequently to

resurface after an initial examination, creating reiterative patterns in which ideas are forced into new contexts and made to form new relationships in combination with other ideas. This dramatic mobilisation incorporates the theme of multiplicity at a narrative level. Novels like *Middlemarch*, to take a famous example, not only make connective structures (networks, webs, tangles) a way of describing the morphology of communal life, they assimilate this logic of association into their narrative method. In all these cases, associational possibility becomes encoded in form. To the extent that this shapes these works—whether multi-volume treatises, novels or periodical essays—it might be thought of as determining the aesthetic of empiricism.

The word empiricism itself requires an immediate effort of qualification, however. Long ago, in *Keywords*, Raymond Williams remarked with some justification that “*Empirical* and the related *empiricism* are now in some contexts among the most difficult words in the language.”<sup>28</sup> That difficulty has yet to be fully recognised or elaborated by contemporary criticism. Its misunderstood meanings, in a historical and philosophical sense, supply one good reason for exploring it as an intellectual position and narrative event. Empiricism’s ambiguities are ancient, however. Its Greek derivation *empeiria* (literally, experience), which fuses *empeiros* (skilled) and *peira* (trial), carried a sense of quackery as well as meaning experimentation, and in the case of the Empiriki school of Greek medicine it could indicate being “sceptical of theoretical explanations.”<sup>29</sup> These conflicting meanings persist in a modified way in the present day. On the one hand, empiricism can be used to indicate something like common sense, an intuitive and unshakeable faith in outward, concrete things, as well as a ‘natural’ grasp of the world recognisable spontaneously within ourselves and in others. Here it would point to an intimate connection with the ordinary, the quotidian—a word for the “data of everyday

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<sup>28</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Fontana, 1976, p. 98.

<sup>29</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, p. 99.

existence,” to appropriate George Becker’s phrase.<sup>30</sup> In another sense, it speaks of the discipline of the scientist (discipline as both the particular expertise or standardised mode of enquiry typified by the scientist, and as the self-control or detachment considered proper to that enquiry). In this connection, empiricism comes close in meaning to objectivity; being ‘empirical’ implies the rigorous pursuit of exactitude, verification, infallible accuracy, pure truth; a neutral and final description of reality-as-given.<sup>31</sup>

These different senses of the word—the one quotidian, the other hygienically professional—are not, of course, in conflict at all. If science can be understood as a particularly organised, developed and rigorous application of common sense then the two casual usages of empiricism need not contradict one another. Both yield versions of the same view: that empiricism signifies a level-headed commitment to solid facts, a practical apprehension of reality as it actually is, unmediated by the vicissitudes of language, interpretation or theory; a process of pure or literal transcription. Regarded as common sense or science, empiricism is thought to be a form of observation claiming to penetrate the structure of reality ‘naturally’. Theories and frameworks, the empiricist supposedly thinks, intervene problematically in this natural process by having a dangerous potential to distort the observer’s neutrality. Untrammelled by theoretical concerns, empiricism is said to adopt a dogmatic, positivist attitude towards its referential objects. It would seem, then, above all, to be an untheoretical (even anti-theoretical) position.

Such are the assumptions attending usage of the term in a great deal of current criticism. Emptied of its philosophical force, empiricism and its cognates have become effortlessly allied with concepts like positivism, scientism, objectivism

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<sup>30</sup> George Becker (ed.), *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 31.

<sup>31</sup> A typical conflation of these different meanings occurs, for example, in the following passage, interestingly in an affirming context: “Empiricism has many virtues. Its reliance upon direct observation and the results of experiment, its closeness to practice, its preference for the facts, even at times its distrust of far-flown abstractions in favor of sturdy commonsense judgment, are useful and necessary qualities.” George Novack, *Empiricism and its Evolution: A Marxist View*. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1971, p. 98.

and realism, all of which are viewed with undisguised suspicion by many positions in contemporary criticism. These concepts are widely seen to be the products of a particular politics of representation, which an era of posthumanist theory and criticism has sought, often valuably, to expose as ideologically invested metanarratives. Pierre Macherey, for example, uses the word empiricism pointedly to refer to those naturalised strategies of observation (alike typifying common sense and science) which aspire, speciously, to an ideal condition of neutrality:

This means that a rigorous knowledge must beware of all forms of empiricism, for the objects of any rational investigation have no prior existence but are thought into being. The object does not pose before the interrogating eye, for thought is not the passive perception of a general disposition, as though the object should offer to share itself, like an open fruit, both displayed and concealed by a single gesture.<sup>32</sup>

Macherey's point comes from a longer passage cited by an approving Catherine Belsey in *Critical Practice* (1980).<sup>33</sup> There, in an often reductive way, Belsey similarly defines her own constructivist (and casually deconstructionist) position against the Anglo-American tradition of empiricism. Once contrasted with her own position, the word empiricism enjoys a remarkable flexibility in Belsey's argument, receiving neither subtle definition nor qualification. On a single page of *Critical Practice*, for example, she uses the phrase "Empiricist common sense" and conflates empiricism with the aspiration for objectivity: "empiricism evades confrontation with its own presuppositions, protects whatever procedures and methods are currently dominant, and so guarantees the very opposite of objectivity, the perpetuation of unquestioned assumptions."<sup>34</sup> Only Belsey's own unquestioned assumptions—that empiricism has always tended to efface its methodological arbitrariness while pretending to some Empyrean point of objective clarity—lend

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<sup>32</sup> Pierre Macherey and Etienne Balibar, "Literature as an Ideological Form: Some Marxist Propositions," *Oxford Literary Review* 3, 1, 1978, pp. 5-6.

<sup>33</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*. London: Methuen, 1980, p. 138.

<sup>34</sup> Belsey, *Critical Practice*, p. 4.

meaning or force to this criticism. Lazily invoked, empiricism emerges as a convenient label for the opposite of Belsey's own more modish outlook. Empiricism, it transpires, is the other of a properly critical practice. The New Criticism, for example, was methodologically hampered by its empiricist assumptions, despite initiating a movement against the still ascendant ideology of romantic humanism. The intentional fallacy performed the necessary step of beginning to liberate textual interpretation from expressive models of reading, but what impeded a full liberation was its own commitment to empiricism, by which she means its "objective analysis of form."<sup>35</sup> For Belsey, as for Macherey, recourse to empiricism remains an unwanted temptation.

The phase of criticism with which Belsey identifies has looked mainly to Continental philosophy—one seemingly antithetical to empiricism in style and temperament—for its defining terms, concepts and language. That alignment or affiliation has served only to strengthen the construction of empiricism as the other of contemporary thought. "Most of us, on meeting the word 'empirisme' or 'empirique' in a work written in French," notes Marian Hobson, "will have had a cultural shock—a shock comparable to looking in a mirror and not recognizing what we see."<sup>36</sup> Empiricism seems arrestingly at variance with the current critical climate. After all, the flourishing of Anglo-American criticism in the last thirty years has occurred largely under the influence of a transdisciplinary body of theory whose genealogy can be retraced through French poststructuralism, not British empiricism. Derrida and Deleuze massively overshadow Hume and Hartley in the field of literary and cultural studies today.<sup>37</sup> The critique of totalising systems,

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<sup>35</sup> Belsey, *Critical Practice*, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Marian Hobson, "Deconstruction, Empiricism, and the Postal Services," *French Studies* 36, 1982, p. 290.

<sup>37</sup> The genealogy of Deleuze's own project itself, however, can be retraced through the tradition of British empiricism, especially Hume in his *Empiricism and Subjectivity* (1953). Elsewhere, Deleuze candidly admits: "I've never renounced a kind of empiricism, which sets out to present concepts directly." (Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, pp. 88-89.) Marcus Doel risks distinguishing Deleuze's "transcendental empiricism" from deconstruction "on the basis of Deleuze's liking for empiricism and Derrida's ambivalence towards it." But Doel does also contrast Deleuze with some vulgar empiricism: "Transcendental empiricism does

universal values, grand narratives of progress, order and unity, the decentring of the subject, and the radicalisation of embodiment are all distinctive theoretical moves made in Anglophone thought via its absorption of Continental anti-foundationalism. If contemporary literary and cultural theory tends to identify the most urgent areas of attention as those where it can privilege discontinuity, disruption, difference, heterogeneity and locatedness, then rarely does it do so from inside the intellectual frameworks supplied by the empiricist tradition. Unsurprisingly perhaps, British philosophy is generally considered unrelated or even resistant to such questions. Since not *au courant*, possible connections between empiricism and theory after structuralism have largely been overlooked. Reputedly incompatible with these newer premises of criticism, empiricism has more regularly attracted attention for being complicit with earlier orthodoxies whose authority theory seeks to demythologise.

Western science, in particular, has become widely understood as a paradigm of objectification and control legitimating dominant forms of cultural power. For the postcolonial critic Ziauddin Sardor, for example, science “is the bastion of Eurocentrism *par excellence*.”<sup>38</sup> The ideologies of science and empire mutually reinforce one another. “The method of science is supposed to ensure strict neutrality and objectivity by following a strict logic: observation, experimentation, deduction and value-free conclusion.”<sup>39</sup> Imperialism, in return, supplies potent metaphors of conquest and expansion for the nature of epistemological progress. The crucial insight widely applied in criticism in the wake of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975) is that these empiricist assumptions were never value-free or neutral, but expressed a specific distribution of power.<sup>40</sup> The epistemology of

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not arrest itself upon encountering so-called ‘brutal’ or ‘primitive’ facts, which are simply there,” he argues, as though earlier empiricisms inevitably did so. Marcus Doel, *Poststructuralist Geographies: The Diabolical Art of Spatial Science*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, p. 40.

<sup>38</sup> Ziauddin Sardor, *Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture*. London: Pluto Press, 1998, p. 202.

<sup>39</sup> Sardor, *Postmodernism and the Other*, p. 208.

<sup>40</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (1975) trans. Alan Sheridan, London: Penguin, 1991; see especially the ‘Panopticism’ chapter.



scientific knowledge, always self-legitimizing, naturalised the observational authority of both scientist and ethnographer which flowed from their characteristic functions of positioning, fixing and framing. Knowing on an empiricist model always reinforced the assimilative and appropriative power of the knowing subject, or the Western observer, whose task presupposed the passivity of the objectified phenomenon before the instrumental power of the gaze.

For Sardor, this necessitated “the ‘ontological’ assumption of separateness.”<sup>41</sup> Self and object were conceived as essentially divided, just as they were within the pervasive discourse of Orientalism, which according to Edward Said had to encounter the non-West “not only as actual people but as monumentalized objects.”<sup>42</sup> In becoming a way of seeing upon which colonial strategies of representation could be modelled, empirical science entailed a dualistic structure that logically regulated its discursive power. It was committed to a notion of “separability,” Sardor argues, which encoded the sovereignty of the knower—“separability of observer from the observed; parts from whole; organism from environment; man from nature; mind from matter; science from religion—separateness from one another of the ‘fundamental particles’ which are presumed to comprise ultimate reality.”<sup>43</sup> Empiricism, Sardor assumes, could enact its pursuit of knowledge only by taking for granted the essential stability of these binary categories.

Feminist criticism and theory have drawn similar conclusions in their effort to scrutinise the relationship of knowledge and power. At stake in many such debates is the intrinsically gendered epistemological tradition of liberal humanism,

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<sup>41</sup> Sardor, *Postmodernism and the Other*, p. 205.

<sup>42</sup> For Said, the West (especially in the nineteenth century) sought paradoxically to create mythically essentialised (i.e. non-empirical) ‘types’ through legitimating discourses such as science: “It was assumed that if languages were as distinct from each other as the linguists said they were, then too the language users—their minds, cultures, potentials, and even their bodies—were different in similar ways. And these distinctions had the force of ontological, empirical truth behind them.” Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. (1978) London: Penguin, 2003, p. 233.

<sup>43</sup> Sardor, *Postmodernism and the Other*, p. 205.

which for Belsey supplied the “man-centred” worldview necessary to empiricism.<sup>44</sup> Part of the argument made against observational epistemology is that the ideal of objectivity served as a way of banishing questions of gender from the pursuit of truth, which was conceived in transcendently purified terms. Bonnie G. Smith, for example, describing the professionalisation of scientific practices in the nineteenth-century, claims that “[t]hese practices involved a commitment to objectivity above such categories as class and gender.”<sup>45</sup> Far more powerfully, feminist theory has viewed the characteristic empiricist gestures of observation and measurement as embedded in patriarchal codes of representation, and enacted through highly eroticised metaphors (unveiling, penetration, possession, mastery). As an aim of research, it is argued, dispassionate or neutral observation was culturally coded masculine. In the words of one critic, “the eye came to symbolize the emotional detachment necessary for hoisting the disembodied (but mostly male) observer out of the reciprocal subject-object milieu and into a terrain of decidability and independence that privileged a universalist subjectivity in which the world was ‘there’ for all to see.”<sup>46</sup> Once again, it is argued, ideological complicity occurred structurally, by reinforcing the encoded separability of knower and known, reproducing the dominant power relationship by securing the knowing subject’s phallic identification.

This critique emerges with particular force in accounts of feminism’s attempt to formulate its own alternative theories of knowledge. Kathleen Lennon, for example, argues:

Feminist epistemologists, in common with many other strands of contemporary epistemology, no longer regard knowledge as a neutral transparent reflection of an independently existing reality, with truth and

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<sup>44</sup> Belsey, *Critical Practice*, p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> Bonnie G. Smith, “Gender, Objectivity, and the Rise of Scientific History” in *Objectivity and Its Other*. eds. Wolfgang Natter, Theodore R. Schatzki and John Paul Jones III, New York: The Guilford Press, 1995, p. 52.

<sup>46</sup> John Paul Jones III, “Making Geography Objectively: Ocularity, Representation, and *The Nature of Geography*” in *Objectivity and Its Other*, p. 74.



falsity established by transcendent procedures of rational assessment. Rather, most accept that all knowledge is situated knowledge, reflecting the position of the knowledge producer at a certain historical moment in a given material and cultural context.<sup>47</sup>

Once again, the model of knowledge which the newer epistemology must be felt to supplant is crudely realist, universalising and theoretically incurious. Lennon contrasts a newly emancipated politics of representation with traditional (male) epistemology, whose obsolescent premises supposedly typify older scientific objectivity. It is a familiar kind of contrast, falling back upon an image of scientific objectivity now widely associated with the Victorian period in particular. For the second half of the nineteenth century is generally felt to be the historical moment when objectivism reached its height, becoming culturally dominant or paradigmatic across fields so varied as natural science and anthropology. According to Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, it was the period when the phrase “Let nature speak for itself” became the watchword of a new brand of scientific objectivity.<sup>48</sup> For Daston and Galison, truth to nature required above all the effacement of subjectivity, which “dangerously” threatened to distort this natural speech (“theory and judgment were the first steps down the primrose path to intervention” in this ideally referential process).<sup>49</sup> The *sine qua non* of mid-Victorian empiricism was a mechanical and aperspectival “fidelity to fact,” an escape from locality, desire and interpretation: “Among these prohibitions are bans against projection and anthropomorphism, against the insertion of hopes and fears into images of and facts about nature: these are all subspecies of interpretation, and therefore forbidden.”<sup>50</sup> Stern and ascetic, empiricist strategies of representation took reality to be readily accessible and knowable; the task was to eliminate signs of human and textual mediation with patience and perseverance.

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<sup>47</sup> Kathleen Lennon, “Feminist Epistemology as Local Epistemology,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 97, 1997, p. 37.

<sup>48</sup> Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, “The Image of Objectivity,” *Representations* 40, 1992, p. 81.

<sup>49</sup> Daston and Galison, “The Image of Objectivity,” p. 83.

<sup>50</sup> Daston and Galison, “The Image of Objectivity,” p. 86; p. 122.

Visual technologies therefore began to epitomise the aim of non-interventionist spectatorship, for “the machine, in the form of new scientific instruments, embodied a positive ideal of the human observer: patient, indefatigable, ever alert, probing beyond the limits of the human senses.”<sup>51</sup> Mechanised observation, Daston and Galison conclude, held out the promise of objectivity because it overcame the empiricist’s all-too-human intervention in the transcriptional enterprise.

Running through all of these accounts, more or less, is a persistent, often overt, spirit of resistance to empiricism. Invoked usually in a gesture of critique, empiricism denotes a set of ideologically bound, disingenuous, untenable—and now historically exhausted—epistemological assumptions and practices. As T. S. Eliot once said of ‘tradition’, seldom does it appear except in a phrase of censure. Commonly stressed in all is empiricism’s blindness to the way knowledge is shaped by determinative contexts, its belief in the transparency of experience, its claim to objectivity, its static ontological divisions of self and world. Yet empiricism has rarely, if ever, had these philosophical implications. Dr Johnson, we recall, kicked the stone precisely to expose empiricism’s baroque falsifications of common sense. Thomas Reid, too, the founder of the Scottish common sense tradition, complained that empiricism threatened to turn the external world into a nonsensical and insubstantial kind of mental theatre. “I see myself, and the whole frame of nature, shrink into fleeting ideas,” he protested upon reading David Hume, “which, like Epicurus’s atoms, dance about in emptiness.”<sup>52</sup> Hume’s empiricism plunged Reid’s picture of the world into instability and doubt, as it did for many other of his ardent opponents, because it allowed the realm of *ideas*—for Reid, an unnecessary *tertium quid* between ourselves and things—to become the constitutive site of epistemological inquiry, thereby opening the path to scepticism. Guaranteeing only an acquaintance with ideas, it meant bracketing objects. For well-founded reasons,

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<sup>51</sup> Daston and Galison, “The Image of Objectivity,” p. 121.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*. (1785 4<sup>th</sup> edn.) ed. Derek R. Brookes, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p. 22.

empiricism was seen as a dangerous and counterintuitive opening in modern philosophy.

Furthermore, viewed as a historical development, empiricism resembles anything but a dogmatic body or consensus of thought. To the contrary, it has a remarkably rich, flexible and accommodating intellectual lineage. In the modern era, it has spawned varied and opposing worldviews—not just Hume’s scepticism, but also Hobbes’s materialism and Berkeley’s idealism—for the very reason that, as the philosopher Stephen Priest has pointed out, “*prima facie* at least, empiricism is logically consistent with any of these three ontologies.”<sup>53</sup> Amidst this flourishing, however, the simple empiricism that Colin McCabe and others have in their sights can rarely be found.

For one thing, objectivism entails commitments inimical to empiricist thought. If one aspect of the concept of objectivity involves the attempt to eliminate the “specifics of the individual’s makeup and position in the world,” as the philosopher Thomas Nagel has argued, then empiricism, historically, has remained mostly incommensurate with the strictures of objectivism.<sup>54</sup> Its attitude towards the senses may have often been ambiguous, even paradoxical to the point of teetering on the edge of absurdity, as we have already seen in Lewes’s example of M. Déal, but still the contingency of the senses has never ceased being centrally at stake to its philosophical claims. At once facilitating and limiting the availability of knowledge, the specifics of our individual make-up and positioning have been for empiricists precisely the ineliminable element in how we picture a real world. Empiricism has invariably prioritised, even when critiquing, the mutable arena of felt experience on which it depends. As George Levine argues: “Feeling, in empiricist thought, is unquestionable fact; it is, indeed, knowledge itself. The question running from Hume through Newman and George Eliot... is about the nature of that knowledge, the kinds of inferences built upon it. Moreover,

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<sup>53</sup> Stephen Priest, *The British Empiricists: Hobbes to Ayer*. London: Penguin, 1990, p. 105.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. p. 5.

empiricism, while seeming to imply a commitment to the primacy of direct experience in the quest for knowledge, has invariably led to confrontation with the mysterious and unknowable.”<sup>55</sup>

Daston and Galison note that nineteenth-century theorists like James Martineau “detected an affinity between science and religion ‘in a common distrust of everything internal, even of the very faculties... by which the external is apprehended and received’.”<sup>56</sup> The senses, they say, were treated by the likes of Martineau as contemptible sources of unreliability, and so had to be overcome in a quasi-religious attitude of self-reproach. Objectivity was all. Yet Martineau’s own words, which they quote here, remind us that however severe one’s distrust of “everything internal,” it is only by virtue of those very sensory faculties that the external world can be “apprehended and received” at all. Even if condemned in the name of disinterest, the senses cannot be jettisoned altogether. Martineau, in fact, points to the inescapability of the senses while appearing to Daston and Galison to have successfully wrestled free of their limitations.

Philosophers, more than literary critics, have long acknowledged how empiricism, far from signalling a commitment to transparent or pre-given facts, has always had to negotiate an almost opposite kind of difficulty: how to move knowledge-claims reliably outward from the essentially private realm of the senses, perception and intellect, without contradicting its grounding principle that all knowledge must be constituted by and within the mediating structures of experience. As Ernan McMullin argues: “If one takes empiricism as a starting point, it is tempting to push it (as Hume did) to yield to the demand not just that every claim about the world must ultimately rest on sense experience but that every

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<sup>55</sup> George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley*. London and Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981, p. 264.

<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, they see this distrust as connected to a highly moralised disinterest, conferring on the scientist a secularised version of priestly authority: “Like the priests whose celibacy, fasting, and vigils purified them for direct contact with the godhead and made them fit vessels for divine truth and worldly power, the self-restraint of the scientists purified them for direct contact with nature and made them fit vessels for natural truth and worldly power.” Daston and Galison, *The Image of Objectivity*, pp. 121-22.

admissible entity must be directly certifiable by sense experience.”<sup>57</sup> The threat it entertains, unexpectedly perhaps, is precisely that of imprisonment in the knowledge seeker’s own consciousness. For the possibility can never finally be eliminated that all an empiricist counts as knowledge of the world is really just a plausibly lucid acquaintance with the contents of their own mind. In the words of another philosopher: “The empirical axiom, if applied consistently and exclusively, leads straight to solipsism... If all my knowledge comes through my senses, so does my knowledge of other men, and ‘other men’ must be defined in terms of my sensorial perceptions only.”<sup>58</sup> Far from being synonymous with objectivism, then, empiricism “always threatens to pull back from reality to the sensation of reality to a solipsistic self.”<sup>59</sup>

Neither George Eliot, Ruskin, Lewes, Bain nor Spencer, it must be said, considered themselves entrapped within a solipsistic prism of experience, or genuinely doubted that we can talk meaningfully about an independent external world. None took seriously the hypothesis that reality was some kind of intricately detailed and extended illusion projected by a deceiving mind. If those well-worn questions about the philosopher’s tree falling unseen in the woods seem largely irrelevant, even quaint, to us in the twenty-first century, they had already begun to look relatively passé to the mid-Victorians. In Spencer and Bain, one finds such debates consigned largely to footnotes or appendices, marginalised by the thrust of more consciously modern arguments.<sup>60</sup> In Lewes, the problem of the external world virtually disappears altogether, displaced in his mature arguments by newer

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<sup>57</sup> Ernan McMullin, “A Case for Scientific Realism” in Jarrett Leplin, ed. *Scientific Realism*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984, p. 19.

<sup>58</sup> H. C. Plaut, “Empiricism, Solipsism, and Realism,” *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 13, 51, 1962, p. 217.

<sup>59</sup> Levine, *Dying to Know*, p. 182.

<sup>60</sup> Bain, in 1889, addressing the ‘Perception of a Material World,’ has the air of someone palpably bored by the question, and impatient to move beyond it: “I can say nothing better respecting it than I have already said” (“The Empiricist Position,” *Mind* 14, 55, 1889, p. 384). See also, for example, Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect*. (1855) London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1864, pp. 631-4. See, too, Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*. London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1855, pp. 58-65 (in subsequent editions this passage is replaced by a new discussion of the nervous system—tellingly, a more pressing mid-century concern, epitomising the modernisation of these debates).



epistemological models derived from psychology and evolutionary theory.<sup>61</sup> What remained crucial, however, at a time when scientific knowledge was importantly gaining ground as a paradigm across the culture, was the issue of how 'reality' is thought into being by constructive and imaginative effort. At the heart of the matter was not whether objects vanish when unperceived, but rather the view that man "cannot transcend the limits of his Consciousness," and a critical recognition of how knowledge establishes itself inside mental, even physiological, structures.<sup>62</sup> Bain, for example, in his earliest full-length study of psychology, clearly outlines the determinative ground of subjectivity:

There is no possible knowledge of the world except in reference to our minds, knowledge means a state of mind; the notion of material things is a mental thing. We are incapable of discussing the existence of an independent material world; the very act is a contradiction. We can speak only of a world presented to our own minds. By an illusion of language, we fancy that we are capable of contemplating a world which does not enter into our own mental existence; but the attempt belies itself, for this contemplation is an effort of mind.<sup>63</sup>

If for Bain we can speak only of a world presented to our own minds, then for Ruskin we can only *paint* a world under the same subjectively led conditions. "Great art is produced by men who feel acutely and nobly; and it is in some sort an expression of this personal feeling," he writes unequivocally in *Modern Painters* III (1856). Artists must not be cold human mirrors, for then they are at their least

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<sup>61</sup> Lewes embarks on a self-conscious task of modernisation with regard to the way epistemological questions are framed, so that under the new aegis of 'Metempirics' the old problem of the external world will look meaningless. Dispensing with the familiar antagonism between sensationalism and *apriorism*, Lewes tries to show it was really a problem of language all along; we must change the metaphor from 'Nothing in the Intellect not previously in Sense,' to 'Nothing in the Organism not previously in Food.' G. H. Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, *The Foundations of a Creed*. (2 vols) London: Trübner and Co., 1874, I, p. 217; see pp. 199-220. (The first two volumes of the *Problems*, which deal mainly with methodological ground-clearing, are marked throughout by this change of register, as will be discussed in more detail later on.)

<sup>62</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, *The Foundations of a Creed*, II, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., pp. 378-79.

realistic.<sup>64</sup> Ruskin, who most admired paintings that somehow visually incorporate the subjectivity of the viewer into the representation itself, developed an aesthetic theory of realism closely resembling Bain's argument. His ideal painter, Turner, becomes exemplary in *Modern Painters* as a consequence of his striving on canvas to communicatively embody a set of values almost identical to those Bain describes here.<sup>65</sup> At their best, Ruskin argues, Turner's paintings depict the very occurrence of the world being brought inside the circle of sensation. They become vivid dramas of perception.<sup>66</sup> And central to Ruskin's argument is an epistemological view, shared by Bain and these other writers, that any act of knowledge expresses relationship, for it is the mode in which the world relates to us as thinking and feeling subjects, and as such is determined by the limited and limiting sphere of consciousness. Even the most scientific accounts of phenomena cannot shed or transcend these necessary structural conditions of knowledge; and what Ruskin calls the facts of nature are themselves very much meant as constructions, a form of human culture.

George Eliot, too, was acutely aware of these conditions. Her novels give the theme of the limits of knowledge a remarkably rigorous fictional expression. One finds it developed into major turns of plot and character, where frequently ignorance and egotism intersect to the detriment of specific human destinies, but it informs her fiction at a micro-narrative level as well, by narrators constantly drawing attention to the varied horizons of the knowable, whether personal, social, cultural or environmental. Take this remark by the narrator of *Daniel Deronda* (1876), for example: "The best introduction to astronomy is to think of the nightly

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<sup>64</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 32.

<sup>65</sup> Although *Modern Painters* makes no reference to Bain, Ruskin's view that Turner's paintings are "dictated by a delight in seeing only part of things rather than the whole" establishes an important point of convergence in their theories of epistemic representation, central to which is a view that reality manifests itself as a set of knowable (or felt) relations. (Ruskin, *Works*, VI, p. 73.)

<sup>66</sup> "[T]he distinction of his mind from that of others consists in his instantly receiving such sensations strongly and being unable to lose them; and then he sets himself as far as possible to reproduce that impression on the mind of the spectator of his picture." Ruskin, *Works*, VI, p. 33.

heavens as a little dot of stars belonging to one's own homestead."<sup>67</sup> It sounds a fairly bland insight, evoking a kind of homespun sympathy with the rustic and cosy. But the deliberate parochialism disguises a much more complex and modern grasp of epistemology, one directly paralleling Lewes's view that "whatever things may be... all they can be to us is what they are in knowable relations."<sup>68</sup> Two points, in particular, follow from it; first, that to be constituted as a knowable phenomenon, the reality described by astronomy (a reality that is quite literally otherworldly) has to be brought inside the circle drawn by the boundaries of our own creaturely habitat or culture (one's "homestead"), in order that those boundaries can be thought beyond in constructive ways. Secondly, it marks the importance of understanding by analogy, or by forms of intellectual substitution, whereby one phenomenon comes to be represented in terms proper to another—here the narrator recommends that vast and distant galaxies should be interpreted as if merely a local "little dot of stars." Both points imply a kind of relativism, and both inevitably question our distinction between imagining and knowing. For Eliot's narrator embraces, among other things, an understanding of knowledge as artifice. Knowledge answers a human need and is a feature of human culture; it can never exist or take a form entirely detached from these imperatives. What we know of the world requires such conditions. It is cultural, not 'naturally' or spontaneously there. Like Lewes and these other empiricists, Eliot was alive to the way knowledge emerges and signifies only inside limited systems of meaning, especially those of the mind, culture and language.

Thomas Nagel, once again, neatly formulates these kinds of problems in a way that can illuminate mid-Victorian empiricism. Despite the widely accepted notion that certainty requires leaving behind point of view, Nagel argues, there are "things about the world and life and ourselves that cannot be adequately understood from a maximally objective standpoint, however much it may extend

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<sup>67</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*. (1876) ed. Terence Cave, London: Penguin, 1995, p. 22.

<sup>68</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, *The Foundations of a Creed*, II, p. 31.



our understanding beyond the point from which we started. A great deal is essentially connected to a particular point of view, or type of point of view, and the attempt to give a complete account of the world in objective terms detached from these perspectives inevitably leads to false reductions or to outright denial that certain patently real phenomena exist at all.”<sup>69</sup> This is a position that the writers under consideration here would have recognised, if not shared. All realised that a view from nowhere would most probably be a view *of* nowhere, too—that is, nowhere meaningful or open to evaluation. Even Herbert Spencer, who could talk boldly of “our firm belief in objective reality,” and whose work attempts earnestly to erect a complete hierarchy of knowledge, segregated the knowable realm from the ultimate ground of phenomenon unconnected to point of view, which it would be contradictory to think or even name.<sup>70</sup>

Empiricism was, therefore, as we have seen, always a subject-centred philosophical position. Crucial to its thinking since Aristotle was the notion that the senses supplied a privileged point of access to reality. But what reinvigorated epistemological debate in the mid-nineteenth century was the understanding of the very subject at the centre of it. Defined as unfixed, mutable, ever in process, the sensory self posited by mid-Victorian empiricism was conceived, in the wake of Darwin and new theories of associationist psychology, in dynamic ways that belonged distinctively to the grain of the period’s intellectual culture. Individual consciousness was by no means regarded as simply a stabilising point of intelligibility. A quite different kind of self was imagined to that described, for example, by Ian Watt in his now classic study *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), where he links realism in eighteenth-century fiction to an empiricist philosophy which “begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses.”<sup>71</sup> For Watt, philosophical and literary narratives alike served to reinforce

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<sup>69</sup> Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, p. 17.

<sup>70</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 70.

<sup>71</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*. (1957) London: Pimlico, 2000, p. 12.

the principle that direct sensory contact with the world promised a reliable pathway to knowledge; to read *Robinson Crusoe* or Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was to find this view not merely confirmed but fully thematised. Even if we accept Watt's characterisation of the eighteenth century, his argument looks erroneously out of step with the mid-nineteenth, by which point Spencer, for one, was arguing that "the inscrutableness of things in themselves results from discovering the illusiveness of sense-impressions."<sup>72</sup>

For change and adaptation became key determinants in empiricist notions of subjectivity. An assumption in all these writers is that possessing knowledge transforms the knower. As Lewes put it: "We are a part of all that we have met."<sup>73</sup> Experience, from the empiricist point of view, provides not only the foundations of all knowledge, it also reciprocally modifies the contours of the knowing subject by being assimilated into their emergent identity. To some extent, this sort of view had always been advanced by the empiricist tradition, because it tended to privilege environmental factors anyway when deciding between nature and nurture as alternative explanations for the sources of the self. But at issue was no longer the earlier (easily attackable) model of the mind as an inert empty vessel, passively disposed to what Coleridge had scathingly called the "blind mechanism" of association.<sup>74</sup> Mid-Victorian empiricism shifted the psychological paradigm so that it moved well beyond romanticism's charge of environmental determinism. Bain, in 1889, points out that "the mode of regarding the infant mind as a *tabula rasa*, inscribed upon by sensible experience, and developed by conjunctions and successions of mere sensations, is not now the received doctrine of any school."<sup>75</sup> Newer, distinctively Victorian conceptual models radically refashioned the intellectual landscape, rendering obsolete Hartley's eighteenth-century scheme.

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<sup>72</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 50.

<sup>73</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, *The Foundations of a Creed*, I, p. 210.

<sup>74</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*. (1817) ed. George Watson, London: Everyman, 1991, p. 73.

<sup>75</sup> Bain, "The Empiricist Position," p. 370.

Instead, for all these mid-century writers, “the mind is a thing of indefinite growth, adaptation, acquisition; its first cast is greatly altered by the end,” as Bain put it.<sup>76</sup>

One context for this more modern empiricist subjectivity was supplied, at least in part, by the view of the individual as an evolutionary organism. Bain argued that the empiricist’s “quarrel is with innate certainties,” and Darwinism proposed a powerfully modern framework in which to articulate that rejection of essentialised definitions of the human.<sup>77</sup> Looking back in his autobiography to the mid-1850s, Spencer recalls how even then “an evolutionary view of Mind was foreign to the ideas of the time, and voted absurd.”<sup>78</sup> But it became for him, and also for Lewes, in particular, a crucial aspect of the epistemological problem. Not only could it be channelled into relativist arguments, for the reason that evolutionary theory obeyed a historicising and contextualising impetus, but it made available an argument for inherited human characteristics or mental powers which exceeded the familiar nature/nurture dichotomy. If, as Lewes saw it, our “organism itself is a product of its history: it is what it has *become*: it is a part of the history of the human race,” then the species as a whole, rather than the individual mind, could carry the responsibility for explaining the provenance of complex psychological functions.<sup>79</sup> On this view, our minds do not resemble empty vessels, but neither is their organisation intrinsic or static. Evolutionary assumptions therefore added plausibility and cutting-edge sophistication to the empiricists’ constructivist views, while deepening resistance to the metaphysical idea of the mind as a fixed entity or substance.

More generally, evolutionary thinking fed sympathetically into a wider shift in Victorian empiricism towards embracing the self—the knowing subject—in terms of change and difference. The new psychological theory of Bain, Spencer and Lewes pictures the mind as a restless network of transformational energy, marked

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<sup>76</sup> Bain, *Logic*, II, p. 287.

<sup>77</sup> Bain, “The Empiricist Position,” p. 369.

<sup>78</sup> Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography*. (2 vols) London: Williams and Northgate, 1904, II, p. 220.

<sup>79</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, *The Foundations of a Creed*, I, p. 218.

everywhere by evidence of constant dynamic activity. Our mental life, Bain argues, is “a vast stream of spectacle, action, feeling, volition, desire, intermingled and complicated in every way, and rendered adherent by its unbroken continuity.”<sup>80</sup> This revitalised associationism, by borrowing conceptual ideas from physiology and incorporating the body, especially nervous structures, into the theory of subjectivity. “Mind,” Spencer remarked, “is not as deep as the brain only, but is, in a sense, as deep as the viscera,” very much following Bain’s lead.<sup>81</sup> To Bain, ‘self’ designated nothing more than the dynamic totality of corporeal tissue and all past and present sensations and thought: “Everything of the nature of a moving power belonging to this totality is a part of self.”<sup>82</sup>

Experience, then, that most crucial concept in empiricist philosophy, carried with it by the middle of the nineteenth century an urgent new sense of multiplicity and instability. Lewes speaks specifically in *Problems of Life and Mind*, for example, of the “multiple unity” of experience.<sup>83</sup> One finds a comparable sense of excess in Ruskin’s representation of landscape, which often he figures as a compelling experience of proliferation: “nature is never distinct and never vacant, she is always mysterious, but always abundant; you can always see something, but you never see all.”<sup>84</sup> George Eliot, too, explores personal experience in terms of broad, drastic and complicated shifts in modes of relations, such as Dorothea’s “hurrying, crowding vision of unfitting conditions” in chapter 50 of *Middlemarch* (1871-2), after she grasps Casaubon’s posthumous intentions regarding a possible future marriage between her and Will Ladislaw:

Everything was changing its aspect: her husband’s conduct, her own duteous feeling towards him, every struggle between them—and yet more, her whole relation to Will Ladislaw. Her world was in a state of convulsive change; the

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<sup>80</sup> Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., pp. 459-60.

<sup>81</sup> Spencer, *An Autobiography*, II, p. 418.

<sup>82</sup> Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., p. 509.

<sup>83</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, *The Foundations of a Creed*, I, p. 29.

<sup>84</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 329.

only thing she could say distinctly to herself was, that she must wait and think anew. One change terrified her as if it had been a sin; it was the violent shock of repulsion from her departed husband, who had had hidden thoughts, perhaps perverting everything she said and did. Then again she was conscious of another change which also made her tremulous; it was a sudden strange yearning of heart towards Will Ladislaw.<sup>85</sup>

Caught brilliantly here, in a passage that itself hurries and crowds with sudden shifts of angle and perspective, is something like Bain's view that "the ordinary mind [has] a great natural deficiency in the power of seizing the exact truth of any phenomenon or incident."<sup>86</sup> But, importantly, it is conveyed from Dorothea's point of view as a vision of her own experience proliferating uncontrollably. It dramatically asserts the multiplicity of experience, and the openness of its many "aspects" or relations to utter transformation. Change, disruption and instability, rather than unity, overwhelmingly result from the forces so vividly at work here, hopelessly confounding Dorothea. We might say that Eliot's passage mobilises a differential energy that refuses to allow experience to coalesce into a fixed organisation. Casaubon may be dead, but Dorothea's past experience most certainly is not; it lives on intensely in the present as a chaotic excess of meaning.

Lewes similarly preferred to cast experience as a kind of turbulence or unsettling. Reviewing the newly published *Jane Eyre* in *Fraser's Magazine*, he wondered: "Has the author led a quiet, secluded life, uninvolved in the great vortex of the world, undisturbed by varied passions, untried by strange calamities?"<sup>87</sup> Vortex, of course, carries a conspicuously modern resonance. His own novel, *Ranthorpe* (1847), an intriguing mixture of realism and romance, tells the story of a young poet's fortunes as he is thrust into the vortex of literary London. Shortly after the critics turn on Percy Ranthorpe, leaving the writer facing penury and

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<sup>85</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*. (1871-2) ed. Rosemary Ashton, London: Penguin, 1994, p. 490.

<sup>86</sup> Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, p. 512.

<sup>87</sup> G. H. Lewes, "Recent Novels: French and English," *Fraser's Magazine* 36, 1847, p. 691.

obscurity, the narrator notes wryly: "The knowledge of life is marvellously complex: its materials are drawn from past experience, present observation, and prevision of the future... [F]or men themselves are ever vacillating between new ideas and ancient prejudices; between their interests and their passions."<sup>88</sup> The novel represents its hero's progress through life precisely as a movement towards growing complexity and vacillation; experience, in the end, destabilises Percy Ranthorpe's early identity as the youthful poet-genius. This recognisably modern emphasis on the fluid and unstable is characteristic of all Lewes's writing. As Rick Rylance has pointed out, William James's 'stream of consciousness' first appears in Lewes as early as the 1860s.<sup>89</sup> Like later writers, his work pushes open the psychological multiplicity teeming beneath even apparently simple forms of experience. It reveals how energy and interaction live vigorously at the heart of everything we encounter through sensation and intellect. A passage from his *Principles of Success in Literature*, describing the role played in the literary imagination by the creative promptings of memory, captures this complexity:

A vivid memory supplies the elements from a thousand different sources, most of which are quite beyond localisation—the experience of yesterday being intermingled with the dim suggestions of early years, the tones heard in childhood sounding through the diapason of sorrowing maturity; and all these kaleidoscopic fragments are recomposed into images that seem to have a corresponding reality of their own.<sup>90</sup>

A modern, perhaps even modernist, blur of cognition is summoned quite strikingly here. As we saw in the *Middlemarch* passage, unsettling shifts of focus create a dramatic impression of dispersal; that is, the sense of a movement from unity to

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<sup>88</sup> G. H. Lewes, *Ranthorpe*. (1847) ed. Barbara Smalley, Athens: Ohio University Press, 1974, pp. 85-86.

<sup>89</sup> See Rick Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture 1850-1880*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 10-13.

<sup>90</sup> G. H. Lewes, *The Principles of Success in Literature*. ed. T. Sharper Knowlson, London: Walter Scott Ltd, 1897, p. 78.



plurality. Boundaries are breached, or spill over; limits are exceeded; properties ceaselessly blend. Nothing quite holds its position. The keynote motifs and metaphors—intermingling, dimness, recomposition—all stand as the rhetorical figures for this pattern of destabilisation.

What should be noted, too, is how this runs against F. R. Leavis's view of experience as "a growing stability of organization."<sup>91</sup> The concept of experience has long been central to the way literary criticism has regarded George Eliot's work, and to her hallowed induction into his Great Tradition. For a generation of critics still under Leavis's influence, experience was said to be at the heart of Eliot's profoundly moral aesthetic, and identifiable with the wisdom of her narrators' humane insight. According to Isobel Armstrong, for example, George Eliot's achievement relies upon "her capacity to move beyond the moral universe of the novel, turn outwards towards the reader and to invoke a general body of moral and psychological knowledge or, rather, *experience*, which can be the corporate possession of both writer and reader; this shared experience is continually being brought to bear on the novel."<sup>92</sup> Experience stands out as the keyword in this essentially formal judgment. It is a consensual category here: it marks a settling of differences, the concordance of points of view. This Leavisite argument, which assumes a seamless continuity between author, text and reader, between the narrated and the extratextual worlds, seizes upon 'experience' as a unified medium cleansed of all marks of difference. Thus conceived, it assists in the attempt to stabilise or universalise value, because at the heart of this idea of experience is its transmission across potentially different human contexts. Yet, as the narrator of *Ranthurpe* reflects, it is precisely "one of the sad conditions of life, that experience is not transmissible."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> F. R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1958, p. 214.

<sup>92</sup> Isobel Armstrong, "Middlemarch: A Note on George Eliot's 'Wisdom'" in *Critical Essays on George Eliot*, ed. Barbara Hardy, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, pp. 120-21. Original emphasis.

<sup>93</sup> Lewes, *Ranthurpe*, p. 99.

For Eliot and these writers, it is an ethical condition of life, too. The particularity of different selves, societies, cultures, readers and texts cannot be transcended, and recognising another's interests requires us to acknowledge these modes of differentiation. The epistemological limits of knowledge thereby enjoin an ethical positioning. Armstrong argues that "George Eliot's procedure depends upon the constant corroboration and assent of the reader to her sayings," overlooking the ethical dimension of writing that entails recognising the otherness of both the textual medium and the reader.<sup>94</sup> The scepticism in Eliot's fiction itself, and in the empiricist culture to which she belonged, casts significant doubt over the validity of the Leavisite judgment. Quite simply, experience to these writers always entails difference and instability. Experience in this sense is much closer to the way Adorno describes the complex, tangled web out of which knowledge emerges: "Knowledge comes to us through a network of prejudices, opinions, innervations, self-corrections, presuppositions, exaggerations, in short through the dense, firmly grounded, but by no means ultimately transparent medium of experience."<sup>95</sup>

The following chapters develop this argument, with particular reference to a cluster of interrelated problems or issues configured around epistemological self-consciousness in writing by Ruskin, Eliot, Lewes, Bain and Spencer: the aesthetic of realism, the theory of perception, the consequences of embodiment in relation to knowledge, and the tension in relativism between situatedness and the aspiration for transcendence. These problems are addressed in turn, chapter by chapter, in relation to one writer specifically, but they involve all of them and cut across their writing without neat separation. Each writer therefore provides a focal point for a particular problem, around whose work it can be concentrated, not a necessary or biographical relationship with it. The problem of perception, for example, is really no more or less a pressing question for Lewes than it is for the others (and indeed it

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<sup>94</sup> Armstrong, "Middlemarch: A Note on George Eliot's 'Wisdom'," p. 118.

<sup>95</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, London: New Left Books, 1978, p. 80. Quoted in John Richetti, *Philosophical Writing: Locke, Berkeley, Hume*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 27.

is pressing), nor is it claimed that his work represents its definitive treatment or resolution in writing of the period. But his particular engagement with perception as a theory gives us a convenient starting point for examining an issue central to all five writers. The aim is as much to explore these radiating lines of connection as it is to illuminate Lewes, say, individually.

The notion of connection implies a guiding methodological assumption that should be clarified openly. Briefly, the movement of ideas across boundaries of genre is crucial to the way this study tries to establish its view of empiricism as a cultural formation, and crucial, too, to the nineteenth century. So vibrantly open is the intellectual context, in fact, that mid-Victorian culture itself could be worth describing as highly interdisciplinary (*predisciplinary* might be a more satisfactory term, historically). The first justification for assuming that extremely porous boundaries connect philosophy, fiction and criticism, then, is a historical one. All five writers were formidably versatile. The long and astonishingly varied intellectual life of John Ruskin (1819-1900) is particularly well known. As a recent biographer says: "No great Victorian was so little confined to one field as Ruskin."<sup>96</sup> Also remarkable, if now less widely known, was G. H. Lewes (1817-78), who worked in the theatre, translated plays for the stage, wrote novels, regularly reviewed for liberal periodicals, and published work which combined aesthetics, psychology, physiology and sociology. Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), himself an impressive polymath, attempted through his *Synthetic Philosophy* to integrate psychology, biology, sociology, politics and evolutionary theory. George Eliot (1819-80) was not narrowly a novelist; as well as editing the *Westminster Review* and contributing essays and reviews to other important periodicals, she translated Spinoza, Strauss and Feuerbach before embarking on her fiction. Similarly, Alexander Bain (1818-1903) wrote for popular, liberal, generalist magazines such as *Blackwood's*, *Fraser's* and *Chamber's*, before eventually being appointed to the Chair in Logic

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<sup>96</sup> Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Later Years*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000, p. 252.

and English at the University of Aberdeen. And while his most important and pioneering work was in scientific psychology, his writing extends diversely into the fields of pedagogy, rhetoric, grammar and logic. Collectively, they all belonged to a vibrant mid-Victorian culture, which in the words of Eliot's husband, J. W. Cross, represented "the most fearless and advanced thought of the day."<sup>97</sup> For them, and for this wider culture, intellectual commerce between the arts, humanities and sciences was, arguably, relatively unrestricted by specialised methodologies and practices, at least in our sense of them today.

One may think of George Eliot's novels as commentaries on, as well as interventions in, this predisciplinary nineteenth-century culture. Famously, for example, *Middlemarch* styles itself as 'A Study of Provincial Life', as if to pose as a formal intellectual enquiry, while refusing to accept the terms and methods of any discipline in particular. For it is unclear exactly what sort of study *Middlemarch* aspires to be: the subtitle prepares the reader, perhaps, for an exercise in social science, but this promise is broken repeatedly by its narrator (a paradigmatic versatile intellectual) who performs in a number of different guises—anthropologist, scientist, historian—in much the same way as these living writers. By turns, the novel assumes the form of a historical narrative ("We belated historians... have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots"), an investigation illuminated by the "serene light of science" (whose gaze is likened to a "careful telescopic watch" or a "microscope directed on a water-drop"), and a symbolic narrative told by a storyteller ("whatever has been or is to be narrated by me... may be ennobled by being considered a parable").<sup>98</sup> In *Middlemarch*, as in the period generally, discussion moves freely across a spectrum of discourses rather than narrowly within specialised disciplines.

F. R. Leavis, unlike Eliot herself, it is interesting to note, upheld the idea of disciplinary impermeability. Critic and philosopher dealt in different realms, he

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<sup>97</sup> J. W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life*. London: Blackwood, 1885, p. 256.

<sup>98</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 141; p. 264; p. 59; p. 341.

argued, and necessitated quite distinct modes of analysis. In fact, he virtually balked at the idea of their crossing over: "It would be reasonable to fear—to fear blunting of edge, blurring of focus and muddled misdirection of attention: consequences of queering one discipline with the habits of another."<sup>99</sup> This raises a second justification of method, also anti-Leavisian: that philosophy can be opened validly "as a kind of writing," as Richard Rorty iconoclastically put it.<sup>100</sup> It is more than just proper for historically founded reasons to discuss these writers as if in conversation between and across genres, for that very possibility is itself also a theoretical point of principle. In the wake of deconstruction, it has become inconceivably naïve to suggest, like Leavis, that the philosophical and the literary confine themselves to independent spheres. One of the most enriching aspects of the emergence of deconstruction (which, for Derrida, began principally as a strategy for re-reading philosophical texts, not literature *per se*) has been its effort to re-identify a forgotten or repressed literary moment in the text of philosophy. As Geoffrey Hartman has said: "The separation of philosophy from literary study has not worked to the benefit of either. Without the pressure of philosophy on literary texts, or the reciprocal pressure of literary analysis on philosophical writing, each discipline becomes impoverished. If there is the danger of a confusion of realms, it is a danger worth experiencing."<sup>101</sup>

Rather than a licence to ignore all distinctions between texts or genres, Rorty's argument, for all its bracing overstatement, at least allows for philosophy to be acknowledged as a richly verbal enterprise. It makes it possible to address the narrative structures of philosophical writing without meeting disciplinary pressures internal to philosophy as such. Thus he argues: "there is no way in which one can isolate philosophy as occupying a distinctive place in culture or concerned with a

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<sup>99</sup> Leavis, *The Common Pursuit*, p. 213.

<sup>100</sup> Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida," *New Literary History* 10, 1978, p. 142.

<sup>101</sup> Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman and J. Hillis Miller, *Deconstruction and Criticism*. New York: Continuum, 1999, p. ix.

distinctive subject or proceeding by some distinctive method... Philosophy is best seen as a kind of writing."<sup>102</sup> One could modify Rorty slightly: philosophy might well be said to have a distinctive place in the culture, after all, just as the institution of literature and criticism have their distinctive place; but allowing for that specific placing does not mean seeing it as a foundational discourse with privileged claims to establishing either 'truth' or method. It does entail opening ourselves critically to the textual medium where philosophy has always happened—where it has had to happen, even when gesturing towards its own effacement—and in which its specificity is always constituted. Whatever else it may be, philosophy indeed comprises a body of writing. This interpretation would represent fairly accurately the manner in which this study approaches the 'non-literary' prose of Ruskin, Lewes, Bain and Spencer. Far from accidental or superstructural, the writtenness of their work cannot be considered separable from the arguments these empiricists make, not least because their relativism implies it. The aim, therefore, is to engage critically with the dramatic textures of Victorian epistemology, and above all to see these instances of empiricism as specific literary occasions, embodied in/as narrative.

Unlike Rorty, the outcome of analysing different kinds of writing here will not be some absolute pantextualism, or an argument that opens out onto a flat horizon of pure textuality. Differences and distinctions prevail, most importantly the recognition that George Eliot is unique among the group in being principally a literary writer, which is to say, concerned with creating imaginatively coherent but nonexistent worlds. Despite what Hartman says, the intention certainly is not to recast or reclaim her as a 'philosopher'—though that label has been attached to her on several occasions.<sup>103</sup> We could risk, at best, the claim that her work becomes art

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<sup>102</sup> Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing," p. 142.

<sup>103</sup> A recent biographer of George Eliot argues that "Writing novels was, for her, a moral activity, more akin to producing philosophy than telling stories." Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian*. London: Fourth Estate, 1998, p. 289. In her own century, Anthony Trollope, Leslie Stephen and Henry James commented on the philosophical dimension of Eliot's fiction; see Dorothy Atkins,



“that finds itself in the condition of philosophy,” to borrow a phrase from Stephen Mulhall.<sup>104</sup> But, even so, it cannot be denied that fiction belongs to a different order of representation than the treatise, the textbook or the essay (different though they are, too, from each other), and it has specific narrative freedoms, even irresponsibilities, which are unavailable to those forms of propositional or persuasive argument. Most importantly, the novel as a genre engenders a hypothetical imaginative plane central to its open identity and sheer formal elasticity. Accepting that logical arguments also depend upon narrative structures should in no way diminish our recognition of this special property of literary fiction. One might say it is a function of criticism to recognise it.<sup>105</sup> For this reason, examples from Eliot’s work are drawn upon throughout, not only as reflections on philosophical or psychological or critical ideas established by the others, but as instances of how fiction generates, extends and reconfigures those ideas in its own terms via resources specific to its medium. However, there is no attempt to translate Eliot’s writing into a decontextualised ‘philosophy’ or secure position, by reconstituting it somehow as systematic argumentation of the kind found in the other writers.

Instead, her relatively mobile presence throughout the following chapters will constitute, in part, an attempt to mark the different narrative terms in which fiction has to be recognised, if not its very flexibility and mobility. Eliot’s work still thinks through the problem of knowledge in robust and rigorous ways, with a similar epistemological self-consciousness to Ruskin, Lewes, Bain and Spencer;

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*George Eliot and Spinoza*. Salzburg: Institut Fur Englische Sprache Und Literatur, Universitat Salzburg, 1978, pp. 1-3. For a more recent study of the philosophical structure of Eliot’s novels see Kenneth Newton, *George Eliot: Romantic Humanist*. London: Macmillan, 1981.

<sup>104</sup> The phrase, taken from an entirely unrelated discussion on film, connects with a view that “films can be seen to engage in systematic and sophisticated thinking about their themes and about themselves.” They are not ‘philosophy’ as such, but do acquire its condition. Mulhall’s background as a philosopher specialising in the work of Stanley Cavell informs his development of this general set of claims. Stephen Mulhall, *On Film*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002, pp. 6-7.

<sup>105</sup> “If there is a difference between the novel and other kinds of narrative, it is related in crucial ways to the sense of actuality, or truth, or ‘realism’, that readers obtain from a story. We believe it, yet we don’t believe it, in a sincere and duplicitous manner.” Martin Wallace, *Recent Theories of Narrative*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986, p. 59.

and it does so without being merely a passive mirror of the others' supposedly more philosophical rumination. Consequently, there are no fixed assumptions about textual priority or hierarchy here. The direction of analysis does not move causally from their work to hers, for example. But its fictionality is a vital and enlivening dimension of Eliot's work, differentiating it in one important respect from the majority of the other texts under consideration. With those provisos and qualifications in place, we shall turn to the body of nineteenth-century writing itself to examine more closely how empiricism confronted the very instabilities on which it was predicated. But that examination requires first establishing the sources of mid-Victorian scepticism in the eighteenth century, which means summoning the ghost of David Hume.

## Chapter One

### **‘The Ghost of David Hume’:**

### **Backgrounds to Mid-Victorian Empiricism**

In a collection of essays published in 1890, the Victorian critic W. E. Henley summarised some contemporary assessments of George Eliot's novels: "It has been said of her books... that 'it is doubtful whether they are novels disguised as treatises, or treatises disguised as novels'... and that 'they seem to have been dictated to a plain woman of genius by the ghost of David Hume'."<sup>1</sup> Regardless of its place in her fiction, the spectre of Hume undoubtedly haunts mid-Victorian discussions of self, knowledge and reality. The psychologistic tendency in British empiricism, which culminated in the mid-nineteenth century in the work of G. H. Lewes, Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer has its source in Hume's belief that the proper starting-point for philosophical, scientific and moral enquiry should be the analysis of consciousness. As he wrote in the introduction to *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739): "all the sciences have a relation, greater or less, to human nature... [and] are in some measure dependent on the science of MAN."<sup>2</sup> One could argue that its attention to sensations, impressions and ideas—that is, to the basic elements of mental experience—has always given empiricism a fundamentally psychological character, but Hume more than any previous British thinker gave empirical philosophy what F. H. Bradley would describe scathingly in the 1880s as

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<sup>1</sup> W. E. Henley, *Views and Reviews: Essays in Appreciation*. London: David Nutt, 1890, p. 132.

<sup>2</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. (1739) eds. D. F. Norton and M. J. Norton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 4.

its “psychological attitude.”<sup>3</sup> In admittedly different ways, Lewes, Bain and Spencer shared Hume’s belief that “the science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences,” and their own systems of knowledge reflect this organising principle.<sup>4</sup>

Hume’s place in the prehistory of mid-century mental philosophy is by no means straightforward, however. Spencer’s ‘transfigured realism’, for example, was as much a refutation of scepticism as it was an attack on transcendentalism, as will be discussed later on.<sup>5</sup> More significantly, three of the philosophical traditions which comprised psychological discourse in the second half of the nineteenth century were derived mostly from Hume or from others’ readings of Hume: associationism, common sense faculty psychology and German idealism. While essentially forward-looking, Bain and Spencer (less so Lewes) belonged to a tradition of associationist psychology which extended back to Hume, whose theory of association, by accounting for all levels of mental organisation, was the most thoroughgoing of its kind before David Hartley’s *Observations on Man* (1749).<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the common sense tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment, which had begun in the 1760s with Thomas Reid’s response to Hume, continued to be influential during the nineteenth century as way of defending innate psychological faculties. Thirdly, Hume’s huge impression on Kant led, indirectly, to the critical philosophy which became so crucial for the development of German idealism and, via F. H. Bradley and T. H. Green, the revival of idealism in Britain in the last quarter of the century. The complex intersection of these three traditions, rather than any simple scientific realism, forms the philosophical background to the culture that produced Ruskin, George Eliot and these other writers. Associationism

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<sup>3</sup> Bradley quoted in L. S. Hearnshaw, *A Short History of British Psychology 1840-1940*. London: Methuen, 1964, pp. 129-30.

<sup>4</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of this see also Rick Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture 1850-1880*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 241-5.

<sup>6</sup> Locke had discussed the association of ideas in his *Essay Concerning the Human Understanding* (1690), but had not given it the central place in his theory of mind that Hume was to in his own *Treatise*.

is Hume's strongest legacy, but faculty psychology and idealism were influential, too, if for the very reason that these mid-Victorian empiricists tended to define their own epistemological arguments in tension with them. It will be convenient to discuss all three in reverse order.

### **The Idealist Revival**

The ascendancy of an anti-Humean idealism in Victorian Britain, propelled by growing interest in Hume's own German successor, Kant, is usually associated with the last decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed, T. H. Green's command in 1876, "Close your Mill and your Spencer, and turn to Kant and Hegel," suggests itself as a symbolic turning point.<sup>7</sup> The purpose of Green's philosophy was to reassert a religious metaphysics which had been undermined in the middle of the century by discoveries in the natural sciences, most dramatically by theories of evolution that seemed to deny any substantial distinction between human and animal categories.<sup>8</sup> Tellingly, an exemplary idealist critique of the associationist tradition appears in Green's lengthy introduction to his 1874 edition of Hume's *Treatise*.<sup>9</sup> In 1886 the publication of James Ward's article on psychology in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* represented another symbolic shift away from the empiricist and associationist tradition. Against the Humean understanding of the mind as ontologically constituted out of its sensations, Ward asserted an active, unified self over and above the level of its mental representations. Furthermore, he challenged the traditional model of consciousness as a succession of perceptions, and more generally opposed the atomistic belief that complex mental concepts, such as reason and imagination, are capable of being analysed into simpler and simpler

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<sup>7</sup> T. H. Green quoted in Hearnshaw, *A Short History of British Psychology*, p. 126.

<sup>8</sup> See Andrew Vincent (ed.), *The Philosophy of T. H. Green*. Aldershot: Gower Publishing Company Ltd, 1986, pp. 1-20.

<sup>9</sup> Other classic statements of late-Victorian anti-associationism include Green's *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883), Bradley's *Principles of Logic* (1883) and Bernard Bosanquet's *Psychology of the Moral Self* (1897).

elements.<sup>10</sup> Where Lewes, Bain, Spencer and other empiricists had shown human consciousness to be subject to a variety of determinations, evolutionary, biological, associative, social, and so on, the idealism of Ward and others offered a means of conceptualising a unified moral subject transcending these kinds of environmental determination.

Ward's influence at the end of the century on particularly Bradley, William James and G. F. Stout, and on a generation in the next century, suggests the revival of idealism in Britain and its interest in Kant and Hegel came at the tail end of the Victorian period. But Kantian-influenced views, in conflict with the 'experience school', were present in the wider culture well before the 1880s, and their overlap explains why empiricists like Lewes talked of the "deep-seated unrest" of intellectual debate.<sup>11</sup> As Maurice Mandelbaum has argued, the idealist movement took hold when British culture was supposedly at its most 'scientific' and anti-metaphysical:

When one recalls that it was in 1850 that Mill could regard Coleridge as one of the two recent thinkers (the other being Bentham) whose thought had left the greatest impress on the age, and that it was in 1865 that Stirling published his *Secret of Hegel* and in 1866 that Edward Caird took up his post in Glasgow, one can recognize that in spite of the dominance of the Utilitarians and the furors of Darwinism, idealism took root within British philosophy in the middle years of the nineteenth century. To be sure, the development of this idealism was slightly different from that which was characteristic of Germany and France... [But] the aim and upshot of the idealist movement was in all three cases the same.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ward asked "whether 'association' should be regarded as the bedrock of all mental complexity and unity, or whether it was a minor affair dependent on some larger and deeper conception of unity." G. S. Brett, *A History of Psychology*. (3 vols) London: George Allen and Unwin, 1921, III, p. 229.

<sup>11</sup> G. H. Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, *The Foundations of a Creed*. (2 vols) London: Trübner and Co., 1874, I, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man, and Reason: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Thought*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971, pp. 9-10.



There are good reasons for sharing this view. In addition to Coleridge and Carlyle, William Hamilton had introduced a basic grasp of Kant to British philosophy as early as 1836 and was “the first to incorporate Kantian teachings into the corpus of his own thought.”<sup>13</sup> Less important figures whose work demonstrated a Kantian influence included James Martineau and the liberal Anglicans F. D. Maurice and Julius Hare, all of whom shared a broadly theological purpose.<sup>14</sup> Lewes and Eliot were themselves familiar with German philosophy, and Lewes’s revisions of his *Biographical History of Philosophy* during the 1860s and 1870s gave the sections on Kant and Hegel greater prominence.<sup>15</sup> Spencer, who abandoned reading Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* very abruptly in 1844, nevertheless sought a system of knowledge that could appeal to the time’s increasingly metaphysical outlook.<sup>16</sup> He records in his autobiography how the opening section of his *First Principles* (1862), which he called “The Unknowable,” discussed “ultimate questions, metaphysical and theological” in order to repudiate a “purely materialistic” empiricism: “My expectation was that having duly recognized this repudiation of materialism, joined with the assertion that any explanation which may be reached of the order of phenomena as manifested to us throughout the Universe, must leave the Ultimate mystery unsolved, readers, and by implication others, would go on to consider the explanation proposed.”<sup>17</sup> Many readers failed to react as he had predicted, but Spencer felt that his division of the

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<sup>13</sup> Hearnshaw, *A Short History of British Psychology*, p. 127. As Hearnshaw notes, it has been suggested that British Kantianism can be dated from Hamilton’s inaugural address in 1836.

<sup>14</sup> Mandelbaum, *History, Man, and Reason*, p. 219.

<sup>15</sup> In a letter to Sara Hennell in 1870 George Eliot writes: “Mr Lewes has got so interested in various parts of his revision – reading and re-reading Leibnitz, Hegel, and much of Kant, and being led on to alterations which he had not contemplated—that the business of this fourth edition is much more important than we expected.” *The Letters of George Henry Lewes*. (2 vols) ed. William Baker, Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 1995, II, pp. 167–8. For the best account of the role of Lewes and Eliot in the transmission of German philosophy in British culture, see Rosemary Ashton, *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought 1800–1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

<sup>16</sup> “I had in 1844 got hold of a copy of Kant’s *Critique*, then, I believe, recently translated, and had read its first pages: rejecting the doctrine in which, I went no further.” Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography*. (2 vols) London: Williams and Northgate, 1904, I, p. 378.

<sup>17</sup> Spencer, *Autobiography*, II, p. 75.

universe into the knowable and the unknowable could be taken as expressing an affinity with Kant's phenomenal and noumenal realities.

Although it would be improper to say that Ruskin, Eliot, Lewes, Bain or Spencer were actually Kantians in disguise, their work has occasionally been interpreted in an idealist light. In Lewes's case, this is partly due to the emphasis he places on the provisional nature of scientific knowledge, which despite historical evidence to the contrary has been used to show that his *Problems of Life and Mind* belongs to a late Kantian tradition.<sup>18</sup> In his study of Lewes, Hock Guan Tjoa tends towards such a conclusion: that in rejecting science as a literal transcription of reality, Lewes necessarily embraced some version of idealism. While arguments of this sort support the view being urged here, which is to say, that German-influenced idealism had become an established feature of British thought before George Eliot's death, they equally depart from it in assuming that empiricism could not question the grounds of its knowledge without becoming in turn transcendental philosophy. As Tjoa himself concedes, it is important to recognise that "the idealist and the empiricist poles of thought on these [scientific] matters were agreed that Newton's much-quoted dictum, *hypotheses non fingo*, was not to be taken at face value."<sup>19</sup>

### **Thomas Reid and the Scottish Enlightenment**

If idealism was an emerging strand in mid-nineteenth-century thought, Scottish common sense philosophy was a far more established tradition. Whereas Hume figures rather distantly in the rise of Victorian idealism, at several historical removes from Green, Ward and Bradley as the philosophical inspiration for Kant,

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<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Newton suggests that, because Lewes sees science as an "ideal construction" rather than literally true, he shares the idealist's view of the universe as fundamentally mysterious. Kenneth Newton, *George Eliot: Romantic Humanist*. London: Macmillan, 1981, pp. 3-20. Rick Rylance observes that "the idea that Lewes was at heart a Kantian has persisted," particularly for the critics Jack Kaminsky, Michael York Mason and Peter Alan Dale. See Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture*, pp. 327-30.

<sup>19</sup> Hock Guan Tjoa, *George Henry Lewes: A Victorian Mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977, pp. 93-4.

his relation to the Scottish Enlightenment is much more direct. After Thomas Reid (1710-96) these two traditions become increasingly hard to separate, a fact illustrated by the phrase 'the epoch of Kant and Reid' which the Edinburgh philosopher A. C. Fraser was able to coin in 1848.<sup>20</sup> Even so, the common sense philosophy which emerged from the Scottish Enlightenment constituted a coherent body of thought and was an important influence on mid-Victorian opinion. It took the form of a direct line of succession from Reid, who followed Adam Smith as professor at Glasgow, to his pupil Dugald Stewart (1753-1828), who took Reid's thought to Edinburgh where he taught moral philosophy, to Thomas Brown (1778-1820), who replaced Stewart at Edinburgh, to finally William Hamilton (1788-1856), who edited Reid's works in 1852 and was chiefly responsible for the impact of the Scottish tradition on mid-nineteenth-century philosophy of mind. By no means always in accord on psychological matters, this group developed along different lines (Brown, for instance, proposed a theory of mental association called suggestion that was in many ways quite unReidian), while sharing a faculty psychology committed to the sovereignty of higher mental functions and compatible with the premises of revealed religion.<sup>21</sup>

What distinguishes the Scottish line of development, including Hume himself, is its purely philosophical approach to the human mind and its exclusion of physiology from psychological enquiry. Although in the *Treatise* Hume argues that no essential difference separates animal and human minds—that it is “from the resemblance of the external actions of animals to those we ourselves perform, that we judge their internal [actions] likewise to resemble ours”—he does not develop this insight (which would of course later become central in evolutionary theory and

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<sup>20</sup> A. C. Fraser, "Sir William Hamilton and Dr. Reid," *North British Review*, 10, 1848, p. 157.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, George Davie, *The Scotch Metaphysics: A Century of Enlightenment in Scotland*. London: Routledge, 2001; S. A. Grave, *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960; G. S. Brett, *A History of Psychology*, II; Terence Martin, *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961.

psycho-physiological associationism) into a radical reduction of mind to matter.<sup>22</sup> Human moral behaviour remains a special category for Hume throughout the *Treatise*. Even so, for Reid such a monistic account of mind was implicit in Hume's theory, and in return his own defence of innate faculties upheld the unique spiritual attributes of human consciousness. As for many of the idealists a century later, there was a deep-seated religious motivation behind this objection to Hume. Reid, a pious Christian to his death, had been a minister in the Church of Scotland for twenty years before writing *An Inquiry into the Human Mind* (1764) and feared that Hume's associationism would lead to a godless materialism. Had he lived to read empiricists like Bain or Lewes in the next century, Reid would doubtless have judged his prediction well founded. His argument for the ontological priority of consciousness, set apart from the dull world of matter and instead identified with the divine mind in a static cosmological hierarchy, makes Reid's position seem far less adventurous than Hume's ingenious scepticism, perhaps even backward looking. Indeed, as the historian of psychology G. S. Brett remarks, Reid "often speaks as if the shadow of the mediaeval theology was still upon him."<sup>23</sup> Stewart and Brown, Reid's successors, stayed faithful to his belief in the substantial autonomy of mind, even where their own theories drew on the laws of association, and the relationship between mental states and underlying physical events (such as vibrations in the nerves, spinal cord and brain, which Hartley had discussed) is not expounded at all in their work. It is an absence which amounts to a denial of any meaningful psychophysical interaction.<sup>24</sup> Hamilton's leanings towards Coleridge and Kant gave this spiritual defence of consciousness a romantic or idealist

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<sup>22</sup> Even so, Hume claims: "The common defect of those systems, which philosophers have employ'd to account for the actions of the mind, is, that they suppose such a subtilty and refinement of thought, as not only exceeds the capacity of mere animals, but even of children and the common people in our own species; who are notwithstanding susceptible of the same emotions and affections as persons of the most accomplished genius and understanding." See Hume, *Treatise*, pp. 118-20.

<sup>23</sup> Brett, *A History of Psychology*, III, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Howard Warren, in his classic study of associationism, questions whether Brown's rejection of psychophysical interaction still entitles him to be called an associationist. See Howard C. Warren, *A History of the Association Psychology from Hartley to Lewes*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1921, pp. 27-8.

inflection, but the anti-materialist thrust of these late philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment remained essentially the same into the nineteenth-century.

Insofar as Reid's main philosophical purpose was to provide an answer to Hume, Hume's influence on the common-sense tradition was a negative one, just as it was on the idealists. Looking at their respective statements of indebtedness to Hume, there is a striking similarity between Kant and Reid's impressions of the *Treatise*; a comparable sense of personal awakening and philosophical dissent, creative inspiration and principled opposition.<sup>25</sup> Despite referring to him as the single most important influence on his work, Reid disagreed profoundly with Hume's sceptical conclusions and valued them only as a point of departure for his own philosophical vision:

Ever since the treatise of human Nature [sic] was published I respected Mr Hume as the greatest Metaphysician of the Age, and have learned more from his writings in matters of that kind than from all the papers put together. I read that treatise over and over with great care, made an abstract of it and wrote my observations upon it. I perceived that his System is all founded upon one principle, from which his conclusions, however extraordinary, are deduced with irresistible Evidence. The principle I mean is, That all the objects of human thought are either Impressions or Ideas: which I was very much disposed to believe untill I read that Treatise; but finding that if this is true I must be an absolute Sceptic, I thought that it deserved a carefull [sic] Examination.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> "I openly confess that my remembering David Hume was the very thing which many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy a quite new direction. I was far from following him in the conclusions to which he arrived by considering, not the whole of his problem, but a part, which by itself can give us no information. If we start from a well-founded, but undeveloped, thought which another has bequeathed to us, we may well hope by continued reflection to advance further than the acute man to whom we owe the first spark of light." Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. trans. Paul Carus ed. James W. Ellington. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*. (1785 4<sup>th</sup> edn.) ed. Derek R. Brookes, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p. 257. Earlier in the *Inquiry* Reid praises Hume as the "ingenious author" of the *Treatise*, but then invokes the sceptical account of personal identity to undermine Hume's authorial claim to the text itself: "but now we learn, that it is only a set of ideas which came together, and arranged themselves by certain associations and abstractions." It is a clever, if philosophically unjustified, move, which anticipates many common-sense defences of the category of the author in twentieth-century critical discourse. See *Inquiry*, p. 4, p. 35.





This is not the only similarity shared by these two currents of thought. As noted above, Scottish faculty psychology, from Reid to Hamilton, opposed physiological explanations of mental states in much the same way that the British idealists did later in the nineteenth century, and its development effectively ended with Hamilton's attempt to fuse the Scottish and German traditions.<sup>27</sup> However, within a rigid framework of common sense principles based on a strongly intuitionist position, Reid's mental philosophy developed along empirical lines and even incorporated an experimental dimension.<sup>28</sup>

Reid's response to Hume was rooted in his objection to the theory of ideas. The mediating activity of mental ideas, he argued, introduced a hiatus between our picture of the world and the world itself. Effectively this stripped material objects of their real concrete existence, and "by a kind of metaphysical sublimation, converted all qualities of matter into sensations." Pre-Cartesian philosophy (the Peripatetic "old system") may have been "commonly vague, analogical, and dark" in its reasoning, but at least its common sense first principles "had no tendency to scepticism," since no "Peripatetic [philosopher] thought it incumbent upon him to prove the existence of the material world."<sup>29</sup> Thus the defect found in Hume is a symptom of a much larger problem that Reid diagnoses in all modern philosophy since Descartes, including Locke and Berkeley, which is to say, the structural understanding of consciousness as a series of simple ideas. Hume's position is not merely an unfortunate offshoot of this tendency, Reid thinks, but its inevitable consequence. Scepticism is the "natural issue" of the Cartesian system. (Reid here is fond of metaphors of legitimacy; the *Treatise* is the "monster" born in 1739,

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<sup>27</sup> The death of Hamilton in 1856, followed by J. S. Mill's criticism of Hamilton's appropriation of Kantianism in his *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865), ended the continuity of the Scottish common sense school. However, it enjoyed a strong influence outside Britain, especially in America, where James McCosh (a former pupil of Hamilton's) "was largely responsible for the enormous impact of Scottish philosophy on the American academic establishment at the end of the nineteenth century" and whose own pupil, J. Mark Baldwin, went on to establish Princeton's psychological laboratory and found the *Psychological Bulletin*. See L. S. Hearnshaw, *The Shaping of Modern Psychology*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987, pp. 93-5.

<sup>28</sup> Hearnshaw, *The Shaping of Modern Psychology*, p. 94.

<sup>29</sup> Reid, *Inquiry*, pp. 210-11.



whose Cartesian parent “may be said to have carried it in its womb from the beginning”.) Without knowing it, modern proponents of the “ideal system,” as Reid calls it, “take the road that leads to scepticism” because the theory has “some original defect; that this scepticism is inlaid in it, and reared along with it.”<sup>30</sup> But Hume’s recognition and pursuit of this sceptical destination mark him out as a special target in Reid’s attack. Even Berkeley, who Reid thinks recognises the scepticism inherent in the ideal system, denies matter only to insist on a universal spiritual substance, thereby avoiding “the dreadful abyss” open before him. Hume, in contrast, reduces mind and body to substanceless ideas alone, so that “I see myself, and the whole frame of nature, shrink into fleeting ideas, which, like Epicurus’s atoms, dance about in emptiness.”<sup>31</sup>

The troubling implications of this reductionism for any unified understanding of the mind are Reid’s main concern in the *Inquiry*. By taking ideas as the basic units of mental experience, he says, an implicit analogy is advanced between the world of mental events and that of matter: ideas function as atomic building blocks of consciousness, as if inner reality were structurally isomorphic with corporeal reality. Hence, the followers of Descartes

acknowledge that nature hath given us various simple ideas: These are analogous to the matter of Des Cartes’s physical system. They acknowledge likewise a natural power by which ideas are compounded, disjoined, associated, compared: This is analogous to the original quantity of motion in Des Cartes’s physical system. From these principles they attempt to explain the phaenomena of the human understanding, just as in the physical system the phaenomena of nature were to be explained by matter and motion.<sup>32</sup>

The mind-matter analogy assumes, wrongly, that the laws of physical nature can be applied to psychological processes, whereas in truth these two regimes are

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<sup>30</sup> Reid, *Inquiry*, p. 212; p. 210; p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> Reid, *Inquiry*, p. 213; p. 22.

<sup>32</sup> Reid, *Inquiry*, p. 212.

categorically unlike: "There is a deep and dark gulf between them, which our understanding cannot pass; and the manner of their correspondence and intercourse is absolutely unknown." Reid concedes that at a primary level in perceptive acts there is a point of contact between these otherwise alienated realms; for example, light falling on the retina causes some kind of physiological impression in the organs of sight, which in turn becomes a visual perception belonging to the mind. Where this differs from the causal account of perception proposed by the ideal system is Reid's strong insistence that the nature of these original physical sensations, and the means by which they excite impressions in the mind, cannot be discovered. All that introspection can reveal is the experience of having these sensory states:

But how are the sensations of the mind produced by impressions upon the body? Of this we are absolutely ignorant, having no means of knowing how the body acts upon the mind, or the mind upon the body. When we consider the nature and attributes of both, they seem to be so different, and so unlike, that we can find no handle by which the one may lay hold of the other.<sup>33</sup>

Reid's haziness on this point may be down to more than just inadequate elucidation. It may indicate a full-blown weakness in his critique of Hume's theory of ideas, for despite the "absolute ignorance" that blinds us to their interactions, mind and matter retain in all but name a causal relationship in the cognitive structure Reid describes. His criticisms seem to presuppose the same ideational model of consciousness that his common sense seeks to discredit, and it is a recurring tendency throughout the *Inquiry*. On the other hand, it sustains his argument that the mind has a mysterious or even spiritual nature, loftily above the mechanical determinations theorised by Hume. In a later work, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind* (1788), this is framed starkly as a question, with

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<sup>33</sup> Reid, *Inquiry*, pp. 175-6.

an equally stark reply: "What is mind? It is that which thinks. I ask not what it does, or what its operations are, but what it is. To this I can find no answer..."<sup>34</sup>

There are, then, two objections to Hume's psychology that stand out here. The first is that the indirect or representational conception of the mind encourages a sceptical view of external objects, whereby real things are transformed into transitory ideas and "my impressions and ideas are the only existences of which I can have any knowledge or conception."<sup>35</sup> In *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785) Reid puts it most unequivocally: "I believe *ideas*, taken in this sense, to be a mere fiction of philosophers."<sup>36</sup> Second, even if ideas can be said truly to exist, they provide an inadequate description of mental events. The Humean view, which imagines the mind to be a reservoir of these simple psychic units, any of which may be recalled from storage by the principles of association, entails a mechanistic and therefore essentially passive understanding of mind which fails to account for its innately active properties. Its operations are self-activating powers or native faculties, not particular instances of trains of ideas. As Reid says in the *Intellectual Powers*: "But the mind is, from its very nature, a living and active being. Everything we know of it implies life and active energy; and the reason why all its modes of thinking are called operations, is, that in all, or in most of them, it is not merely passive, as body is, but is really and properly active."<sup>37</sup> This familiar objection to empiricist accounts of ideation returns again and again during the nineteenth-century, sometimes in slightly modified forms, to plague associationist psychology until its more dynamic reformulations by Bain and Spencer in the 1860s. Coleridge's famous criticism of Hartley in his *Biographia Literaria*, for example, runs along similar lines, emphasising how in Hartley's system the will and its attendant faculties are "parts and products of this blind mechanism, instead of

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas Reid, *Thomas Reid's Inquiry and Essays*. eds. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983, p. 301.

<sup>35</sup> Reid, *Inquiry*, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, p. 143.

<sup>37</sup> Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, p. 133.

being distinct powers, whose function it is to controul, determine, and modify the phantasmal chaos of association.”<sup>38</sup> Reid’s difficulty with Hume is reiterated later, too, by William Hamilton in the mid-Victorian instalment of this long struggle between faculty psychology and associationism.

Before turning to Stewart, Brown and Hamilton, it is worth noting briefly the peculiarities of Reid’s version of this standard criticism. One important characteristic is its basis in his theory of language. For Reid, the structure of language and the grammatical rules that govern its meaning provide the simplest, yet most comprehensive, proof of common sense psychology. First, this is because language imposes distinctions between the mind, the actions of its faculties, and the world of objects outside it, which justify the naturalness of the common sense position. The sentence ‘I see the moon’, for example, carves up the reality being described into a self (where the action originates), a specific mental function (belonging to the mind, but not identical with it) and a discrete material body (experienced by the mind directly). Language shows that all perceptual, emotional and intellectual states direct themselves towards an intentional object: seeing implies something being seen; anger implies something at which to be angry. But Hume’s system erases these natural distinctions: “When he speaks of the ideas of memory, the ideas of imagination, the ideas of sense, it is often impossible, by the tenor of his discourse, to know whether, by those ideas, he means the operations of the mind, or the objects about which they are employed. And, indeed, according to his system, there is no distinction between the one and the other.”<sup>39</sup> Horrified though he is, Reid grasps here an important aspect of Hume: his anti-essentialism. Second, language always depicts mental functions as essentially vital, exactly as common sense suggests: “In all ages, and in all languages, ancient and modern, its operations are expressed by active verbs.” Reid’s view that every mental operation

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<sup>38</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*. (1817) ed. George Watson, London: Everyman, 1985, p. 73.

<sup>39</sup> Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, p. 140.

presupposes some animating power behind it finds support from the “words of active signification” which are used in everyday language to describe the mind’s activities.<sup>40</sup> Thus the organisation of language contradicts Hume’s passive theory of mind and seems to verify Reid’s faculty psychology. (Needless to say, this entails an evident circularity: the mind has innately active powers because language attests to them, but language is organised the way it is because in reality the mind has innately active powers, thus begging the question. On this point, and indeed on most others, Reid does not get to the heart of Hume’s scepticism to properly challenge it, unlike Kant, whose legacy is consequently far stronger than Reid’s own.)

The general tone of Reid’s criticism, too, is noteworthy. Occasionally its theological principles generate an atmosphere of undisguised moral judgement. The passive mental structure advanced by Hume, he says, reduces the “whole mechanism of sense, imagination, memory, belief, and of all the actions and passions of the mind” to three laws of association, so as to deny the humanness of “the man that Nature made.” He likens this to a sinful perversion of the divine order:

If this is the philosophy of human nature, my soul enter thou not into her secrets. It is surely the forbidden tree of knowledge; no sooner I taste it, than I perceive myself naked, and stript of all things, yea even of my very self... If Philosophy contradicts herself, befools her votaries, and deprives them of every object worthy to be pursued or enjoyed, let her be sent back to the infernal regions from which she must have had her original.<sup>41</sup>

In these biblical scenes, Hume plays Satan to Reid’s commonsense God. Scepticism perverts, corrupts and blasphemes; faculty psychology upholds dignity, order and truth. Much of the force of Reid’s whole argument comes from his claim—which is rhetorically enriched here to an excessive degree—that mental faculties are

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<sup>40</sup> Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, p. 133.

<sup>41</sup> Reid, *Inquiry*, pp. 22-24.

naturally part of the make-up of the mind. "I apprehend that the word *faculty* is most properly applied to those powers which are original and natural, and which make a part of the constitution of the mind."<sup>42</sup> To argue against this innatism would therefore be not merely counterintuitive but *unnatural*, with both moral and religious repercussions. In this sense, the common sense philosophy is appealingly normative, a set of natural beliefs apparently beyond negation. This is just how Reid formulates his position in the *Intellectual Powers*: as a list of principles immune to doubt, including the certainty of a thinking entity called the self, the existence of other selves and the reality of external objects. Important to note as well is the following statement on the mental faculties, which can stand usefully here as a summary of Reid's psychological naturalism: "I shall take it for granted, that I *think*, that I *remember*, that I *reason*, and in general, that I really perform all those operations of mind of which I am conscious."<sup>43</sup>

Though limited in its insight into Hume, Reid's thought was the single greatest influence on the development of Scottish philosophy in the first half of the nineteenth century. Historians of ideas have disagreed over Reid's importance, however. G. S. Brett praises his work for rejecting associationism, though concludes that "for psychology it did but little, since it took from the first an unfortunate direction"; David J. Murray, on the other hand, claims that "Reid held a vital position in the development of British academic psychology"; and, more emphatically, L. S. Hearnshaw credits him for offering "the most comprehensive treatment of the subject prior to the nineteenth century" and endorses the practical value of his common sense principles: "Such beliefs, though they may stick in the gullets of philosophers, are perhaps not a bad set of working principles for a psychologist."<sup>44</sup> Despite their differences, a common theme connects these various

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<sup>42</sup> Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, p. 134.

<sup>43</sup> Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, p. 152.

<sup>44</sup> Brett, *A History of Psychology*, III, pp. 13-16; David J. Murray, *A History of Western Psychology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983, p. 118; Hearnshaw, *The Shaping of Modern Psychology*, pp. 93-5.



assessments. None of them mentions the impact of Reid, and that of his successors, Stewart, Brown and Hamilton, on Victorian philosophical thought. Indeed, the influence of these thinkers on the nineteenth century has in general been underestimated, yet they represent a line of thought which retained a strong hold on mainstream intellectual opinion during the period 1840-80. Considering the extent of his influence and the depth of his learning, Hamilton's neglect, in particular, seems most undeserved. His crucial role in the articulation of Reidian faculty psychology in Victorian culture, which he brought up to date with mid-century psychological trends such as phrenology, will be considered after sketching briefly the places of Stewart and Brown in this distinctive succession.

Thomas Brown, and to a lesser extent Dugald Stewart, disagreed with Reid on a number of important issues, but their serious treatment and further development of his work make them his direct intellectual heirs. Stewart, whose three-volume *Elements of the Principles of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* was published between 1792 and 1827, covered the same psychological terrain as his predecessor, and like Reid (and the rest of the so-called Scottish School) his lectures were attended and read by a general audience, not just a narrowly academic one. Where he departed most obviously from Reid was the greater emphasis he placed on the association of ideas; for Stewart, two or more habitually linked ideas can be said to share an associative bond, and some of the intellectual faculties, such as fancy and invention, work entirely according to patterns of association. But his divergence from Reid should not be overstated. Importantly, Stewart does not expound specific laws of association as such, which distinguishes him from other exponents of the associationist tradition. This vagueness casts doubt over the centrality of associationism to his account of the mind, as for Hume it had been a priority to establish clear regulative principles. Secondly, examples of associated ideas, he insists, presuppose some prior capacity to produce those associations, which is to say, he thinks of association itself as really a type of native

faculty. And finally, like Reid, his psychology is structured around various faculties that exist outside or before the contingent process of mental association, such as memory and reason.<sup>45</sup> In these ways Stewart continued to propound the Reidian philosophy, taking a dim view of the earlier empiricists and their rejection of pre-existing or instinctual levels of mental organisation.

Brown, Stewart's pupil at Edinburgh, studied law and medicine before replacing him as professor in 1810, yet his psychology did not take the thought of his predecessors in a physiological direction. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1820) he retained their model of consciousness as a current of thoughts modified by reason, memory, imagination, and so on, while giving a far more a detailed account of the principles of association. Here he specified nine secondary laws in addition to the main law of proximity ('contiguity' in Hume's terminology), by which Brown meant to show how varying conditions affect the development of associative trains, such as the recentness, duration and intensity of the mind's original ideas. He differed further from Reid in his understanding of how the mind's functions are divided up; where Reid had split the mental powers into two types, intellectual (or powers of the understanding) and active (including the emotions and passions), Brown considered mental events to fall into two different categories, which he called internal and external. External states, he said, can be caused only by objects situated outside the mind, whereas internal states—either intellectual or emotional—can causally modify one another without any external stimulus. In effect, this new structural arrangement made emotional states subordinate to their intellectual counterparts, declassifying them as active powers

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<sup>45</sup> Stewart mentions Hume's laws of association in passing, adding that associative connections are made between words and sounds (particularly in poetry) as well as between the things to which those signifiers refer, before concluding that "the view of the subject which I propose to take, does not require a complete enumeration of our principles of association." On the question of the mind's volitional control over its trains of association, he says: "Notwithstanding, however, the immediate dependence of the train of our thoughts on the laws of association, it must not be imagined that the will possess no influence over it. This influence, indeed, is not exercised directly and immediately... but it is, nevertheless, very extensive in its effects; and the different degrees in which it is possessed by different individuals, constitute some of the most striking inequalities among men, in point of intellectual capacity." Dugald Stewart, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*. ed. G. N. Wright. London: Thomas Tegg, 1843, pp. 153-7.

in the sense that Reid had theorised. It is thus unsurprising that estimates vary as to Brown's proximity to the rest of the Scottish common sense philosophers. "His writings and teachings form a sort of foreign episode in our philosophical literature," wrote John Veitch in the 1880s, pointing out the influence of the French sensationalists Condillac and de Tracey on Brown's philosophy.<sup>46</sup> William Hamilton, Brown's successor, thought that he had misunderstood Reid ("he has completely misapprehended Reid's philosophy, even in its fundamental position") and that he departed from him completely on the question of perception. Hamilton calls Brown's theory 'hypothetical realism', by which he means an indirect or representational view of perception contrary to Reid's firm belief in intuitional knowledge of external objects.<sup>47</sup> However, Hamilton's criticisms of Brown were themselves criticised in turn by J. S. Mill, who argued that Brown's theory of perception was functionally identical with Hamilton's own: "He assumes no tertium quid, no object of thought intermediate between the mind and the outward object... But if Brown's theory is not a theory of mediate perception, it loses all that essentially distinguishes it from Sir William Hamilton's own doctrine."<sup>48</sup> Thus Mill returned Brown to the Reid-Hamilton line of Scottish philosophy. Indeed, despite differences on matters of detail, Brown's system expressed at heart a common sense view very much in the Reidian tradition, allied to the immediacy of the perceptual faculties, resistant to the identification of mind with the brain, and overseen by a Christian deity.

It was mainly through William Hamilton that the thought of Reid, Stewart and Brown exerted an influence on the period of intellectual history represented by George Eliot, Ruskin, Lewes, Bain and Spencer. Pedantically, one might object that

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<sup>46</sup> John Veitch, *Hamilton*. Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1882, p. 24.

<sup>47</sup> Sir William Hamilton, *Discussions on Philosophy and Literature, Education and University Reform, Chiefly from the Edinburgh Review; Corrected, Vindicated, Enlarged, in Notes and Appendices*. London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1852, pp. 44-97.

<sup>48</sup> John Stuart Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy and of the Principal Philosophical Questions Discussed in his Writings*. (1865) London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., 1867, pp. 192-3.

Hamilton, who died three years before Eliot had published her first novel, *Adam Bede*, in 1859, belonged to an earlier phase of nineteenth-century thought. But there are two good reasons why this objection misses the point being argued here, the first of which is that it is not borne out by historical context. Eliot's first printed work, a religious poem in the *Christian Observer*, was published as early as 1840, and her translations of German philosophy were written whilst Hamilton was at the height of his intellectual powers.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, the first edition of Lewes's *A Biographical History of Philosophy* appeared in four volumes in 1846 (a revised second edition was printed in 1857), followed by Comte's *Philosophy of the Sciences* (1853), and by that time Ruskin had written two volumes of *Modern Painters*. In 1855, Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* and Bain's *The Senses and the Intellect* both appeared, still four years before the posthumous publication of Hamilton's *Lectures on Metaphysics* (1859). As these examples show, Hamilton's career overlapped sufficiently with these writers for it to be argued that they participated in a common intellectual culture. Even if a generational distinction is made, it must be noted that Hamilton's influence extended into the second half of the century by means of several devotees, such as T. S. Baynes, a professor at St Andrews and later editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, who formed his direct intellectual legacy.<sup>50</sup> Second, because this study is less concerned with mapping instances of personal influence, such as Eliot's familiarity with specific texts written by Hamilton, than it is with the general circulation of ideas within a definable community, a thinker of Hamilton's stature is crucially relevant here. It is certainly true that his career was in its twilight when Eliot *et al* were just beginning to establish their various places within mid-Victorian culture, but by then Hamilton had spent twenty years shaping the intellectual landscape they would inherit and

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<sup>49</sup> The poem, "As O'er the Fields", was published in January 1840; her translation of Strauss's *The Life of Jesus* appeared in 1846, followed by translations of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* in 1854 (currently the only available English translation) and Spinoza's *Ethics* in 1856 (unpublished until 1981).

<sup>50</sup> See Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture*, pp. 28-9, p. 44.

out of which their own thought would emerge.<sup>51</sup> His ideas were absorbed into the fabric of intellectual discussion before, during and after the time that Eliot and her circle contributed to it themselves. For these reasons, Hamilton and the tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment deserve to be recognised as a major part of their intellectual inheritance.

The movement against psycho-physiology entered a new era with Hamilton, though the humanistic style of its psychology altered very little. The old paradoxes remained that had been typical of Reid; on the one hand, common sense was seen to reveal straightforward psychological truths in a world of intersubjective certainty (as opposed to Hume's private world of doubt), whilst simultaneously it preserved the tantalising mystery of the human mind by keeping it beyond the reach of empirical scrutiny. For Hamilton, too, the mind was both commonplace and spiritually affiliated. Moreover, he argued, its higher faculties are not resolvable into atomic trains of ideas formed at an anatomical level. The general expansion of physiological knowledge in the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly in the primitive science of neurology, represented a growing trend of materialist psychology that Hamilton's philosophy of mind, like Reid's before him, strongly resisted. W. B. Carpenter was typical of a new group of thinkers from medical backgrounds who, dissatisfied with the "prevalent neglect of the *mutual relations* of Mind and Body," sought to establish a physiological basis for the study of the mind:

[T]he Mind and the Brain, notwithstanding these differences in *properties* which places them in different philosophical categories, are so intimately blended in their *actions*, that more valuable information is to be gained by seeking for it at the points of contact, than can be obtained by the older methods of research, in which the Mind has been studied by Metaphysicians

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<sup>51</sup> Lewes, Spencer and Bain were all directly familiar with Hamilton's work. Bain records attending a seminar led by Hamilton in Edinburgh in the spring of 1841, during which students read out their essays on the laws of association. Incidentally, all failed to impress him: "there was not a concrete example in any one of the papers." Alexander Bain, *Autobiography*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1904, p. 107.

altogether without reference to its material instrument; whilst the Brain has been dissected by Anatomists and analyzed by Chemists, as if they expected to map-out the course of Thought, or to weigh or measure the intensity of Emotion.<sup>52</sup>

Carpenter may have had Hamilton in mind when he mentioned exponents of the “older methods of research.” In this respect, Hamilton’s common sense metaphysics seemed to oppose progress in the way that had been typical of the Scottish philosophers ever since Reid, though his interest in Kantianism made him appear uncharacteristically forward-looking with respect to developments in philosophy. Hamilton’s inflexibility on the mind-body question seemed to be corroborated by personal experience, however. During a period of illness in 1844 the left side of his body was left temporally paralysed and his health permanently weakened. Yet, despite enduring physical frailty, his mental strength remained unimpaired for the rest of his life and even appeared to have improved after the illness had passed, providing for Hamilton a concrete illustration of the mind’s autonomy over the body.<sup>53</sup>

But it was not only Carpenter’s school which seemed to suggest that intellectual opinion was moving away from Hamilton’s strict metaphysical dualism. Another psychological trend at this time expressed a shift in the public imagination: phrenology. The science of phrenology, with its assumptions about the close relationship between the form of the cranium and the structure of the psyche, had begun in the 1790s with Franz Joseph Gall’s theory of the brain as the “organ of the mind,” and in Britain it reached the height of its massive popularity between 1820 and 1840.<sup>54</sup> Its impact on the vocabulary of psychology probably

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<sup>52</sup> W. B. Carpenter, *The Principles of Mental Physiology*. (1875) London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1993, pp. 3-4.

<sup>53</sup> For a more detailed account of this episode, see Veitch, *Hamilton*, pp. 10-12.

<sup>54</sup> Gall quoted in Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 61.



extended into the latter part of the nineteenth century, however.<sup>55</sup> As late as 1880, Charles Bray and George Eliot were still speculating about what insights a phrenological measurement of the head of her new husband, J. W. Cross, might reveal.<sup>56</sup> Most of Eliot's circle, with the notable exception of Bray, came eventually to discredit the premises and practices of this mid-century phenomenon (Lewes in particular rejected it outright), but not without having first shown considerable interest in the 'scientific' form of its psychological analysis. In 1844 Eliot had a cast made of her head for Bray to examine and she allowed George Combe to conduct another craniological study in 1851.<sup>57</sup> Spencer, who also had his skull scrutinised around this time, even went so far as designing devices for more accurate phrenological measurement.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the phrenologists' central idea—that there is a meaningful correspondence between external appearance and inner moral character—is prominent throughout Eliot's fiction; one of the main ways her characters read (and misread) the thoughts, beliefs and desires of other characters is by interpreting outward physiological signs. The idea is expressed explicitly by Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* when she explains to her sister Celia how it is possible to "see the great soul in a man's face."<sup>59</sup> (Crucially, since the particular man in question here is Casaubon, this advice is shown by Eliot to be less than reliable; the psychological inferences Dorothea draws regarding her future husband turn out to be mistaken and lead to their unhappy marriage.)

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<sup>55</sup> Shuttleworth suggests that the impact of phrenology on ways of thinking about and describing mental experience during the Victorian period has generally been underestimated. She notices not only the extent to which its language permeates Charlotte Brontë's fiction, but also how the phrenological writings of J. C. Spurzheim and George Combe were "transformed into an explicit social programme." She further points out that Combe's *Constitution of Man* (1828) had sold an astonishing 90,000 copies by 1851. See Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, pp. 57-70.

<sup>56</sup> Katherine Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian*. London: Fourth Estate, 1998, p. 476.

<sup>57</sup> Hughes, *George Eliot*, p. 87; p. 178.

<sup>58</sup> Spencer's examination in 1842 by J. Q. Rumball ("a phrenologist at that time of repute") was not entirely inaccurate; despite concluding that "such a head as this ought to be in the Church", the evaluation found his self-esteem to be "very large" and his wit "moderate", concluding that Spencer's moral character was "Persevering and prudent, reasonably prizing money and benevolent withal." The cephalograph he designed in 1846, which then he abandoned as a crude prototype, was intended to correct the inaccuracies of conventional head reading and give phrenology greater scientific credibility. It suggests that Spencer, like Eliot herself at the time, accepted in principle the correspondence between organ size and human psychology which the theory espoused. Spencer, *Autobiography*, I, pp. 200-2; pp. 540-3.

<sup>59</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*. (1871-2) ed. Rosemary Ashton. London: Penguin, 1994, p. 20.

Hamilton's flirtation with phrenology resembled in some respects that of Eliot and her circle. After taking some interest in the theory in the 1820s, even to the extent of dissecting human brains to investigate the cerebellum and frontal sinuses, he too rejected the dubious science.<sup>60</sup> This agreement says much about how various currents of thought at the time overlapped and collided. Lewes, a pioneer of physiological psychology during the 1860s and 1870s, approached these questions from a very different perspective than did Hamilton and the Scottish Enlightenment tradition, so their common hostility towards phrenology may seem surprising. It illustrates that the voices which made up these mid-Victorian debates were rarely organised into clear sides or predictable groups. Interestingly, for example, there were aspects of phrenology which should have appealed to both Hamilton and Lewes respectively: on the one hand, its model of cerebral localisation was still a kind of faculty psychology, where different mental functions and attributes were assigned specific places in the brain; on the other, from Lewes's point of view, it offered a picture of mental experience which took biological determination properly into account. But to Hamilton its explanations seemed materialistic, if not irreligious, and to Lewes its claims were pseudo-scientific, especially in its popular forms.<sup>61</sup> Hamilton likewise scorned the "facile credence popularly accorded, in this country, to the asserted facts of Craniology."<sup>62</sup> In papers read before the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1825 and 1826 he put the case publicly, in effect making himself a spokesman for the anti-phrenologist cause and an arch opponent of Gall's disciple, J. C. Spurzheim. His refusal to attend dissections performed by Spurzheim in the late 1820s attracted a lot of criticism from the Scottish press, who interpreted Hamilton's silence as an admission of his

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<sup>60</sup> David de Giustino, *Conquest of Mind: Phrenology and Victorian Social Thought*. London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1975, pp. 41-2; John Veitch, *Memoir of Sir William Hamilton*. Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1869, pp. 113-115.

<sup>61</sup> By 1840 practitioners of phrenology in Britain and America were exploiting (often lucratively) its practical applications, such as marriage counselling, portrait analysis and vocational guidance, none of which reinforced phrenology's philosophical credentials. See De Giustino, *Conquest of Mind*, pp. 58-9.

<sup>62</sup> Hamilton, *Discussions*, p. 611.

opponent's superiority as an anatomist and therefore as a victory for phrenology.<sup>63</sup> In his *Lectures On Metaphysics*, however, he clarified his position by rehearsing an argument which Reid had used against Hume: that to "explain the phaenomena of mind by the phaenomena of organisation" is from the start misconceived:

That the mind, in its lower energies and affectations, is immediately dependent on the conditions of the nervous system, and that, in general, the development of the brain in the different species of animals is correspondent to their intelligence,—these are conclusions established upon an induction too extensive to admit of doubt. But when we attempt to proceed a step farther, and to connect the mind or its faculties with particular parts of the nervous system, we find ourselves at once checked. Observation and experiment seem to fail; they afford only obscure and varying reports; and if, in this uncertainty, we hazard a conclusion, this is only a theory established upon some arbitrary hypothesis, in which fictions stand in place of fact.<sup>64</sup>

Thus Hamilton's approach remained resolutely philosophical at a time when the mind was increasingly being discussed in non-philosophical contexts. Its passage into areas outside the domain of philosophy, and eventually into new fields like neuroscience and experimental psychology, is a major theme of the period as a whole. But for Hamilton not only was consciousness very much a philosophical matter, philosophy itself was primarily psychological. Since the existence of phenomena can only be known by examining the contents of consciousness, he argued, philosophical knowledge has its basis in the psyche (this was classically Humean, of course, and a further indication of how Hume haunted these mid-Victorian discussions). Hamilton even thought of the branches of philosophy as different areas of psychology: philosophy of mind could be classified as Empirical Psychology, epistemology as Rational Psychology, and metaphysics as Inferential

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<sup>63</sup> De Giustino, *Conquest of Mind*, p. 42.

<sup>64</sup> Sir William Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic*. eds. H. L. Mansel and John Veitch. (2 vols) Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1859, I, pp. 404-5.

Psychology.<sup>65</sup> According to Hamilton, knowledge of the world is inseparable from the problem of consciousness, just as it is for the mid-century empiricists, including George Eliot, whose fiction repeatedly examines how perspective conditions the availability of knowledge. "Consciousness," Hamilton states in the *Lectures*, "lies at the root of all knowledge" and it "constitutes the fundamental form of every act of knowledge."<sup>66</sup> So knowledge cannot exist apart from consciousness, since, in a certain sense, knowledge is one of its attributes:

Thus, in the present instance, consciousness and knowledge are not distinguished by different words as different things, but only as the same thing considered in different aspects... Knowledge is a relation, and every relation supposes two terms. Thus, in the relation in question, there is, on the one hand, a subject of knowledge,—that is, the knowing mind,—and on the other, there is an object of knowledge,—that is, the thing known; and the knowledge itself is the relation between these two terms.<sup>67</sup>

Here the influence of Kant is discernable more than anywhere else in Hamilton's philosophy. As for Kant, the object always presupposes the conscious subject. Thus knowledge, for Hamilton, is relative: "We know, and can know, nothing absolutely in itself: all that we know is existence in special forms or modes, and these, likewise, only in so far as they may be analogous to our faculties." What he calls the "great axiom" of his philosophy is "that all human knowledge... is only of the relative or phenomenal."<sup>68</sup> In this way, Reid's dogmatic confidence in common sense has been replaced by a critical, less naturalistic, approach to the problems of philosophy. However, Hamilton's leanings towards Kant pose a crucial question: how can his relativist theory of knowledge be reconciled with the 'natural

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<sup>65</sup> Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, I, pp. 121-125.

<sup>66</sup> Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, I, p. 191; p. 264. Unlike his predecessors, especially Reid, Hamilton makes it clear that consciousness is not a special faculty of the mind but instead a condition of psychological existence: "[C]onsciousness, consequently, is not one of the special modes into which our mental activity may be resolved, but the fundamental form, — the generic condition of them all. Every intelligent act is thus a modified consciousness; and consciousness a comprehensive term for the complement of our cognitive energies." Hamilton, *Discussions*, p. 47.

<sup>67</sup> Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, I, p. 195.

<sup>68</sup> Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, I, p. 153; p. 136.

realism' of Reid and the Scottish School? According to the former, the object-in-itself cannot be known, whereas for the latter perception is immediate, direct and complete. As noted above, Hamilton attacked Brown for his representational view of consciousness ('hypothetical realism'), precisely because "the hypothetical realist contends, that he is wholly ignorant of *things in themselves*" and so holds that "the mind is *blindly* determined to *represent*, and *truly* to represent, the reality which it does not know."<sup>69</sup> Aware that this sounded strikingly similar to his own phenomenalist argument, Hamilton thought he could resolve the problem in the following way: "I have frequently asserted, that in perception we are conscious of the external object immediately and in itself. This is the doctrine of Natural Realism. But in saying that a thing is known in itself, I do not mean that this object is known in its absolute existence, that is, out of relation to us."<sup>70</sup> While not entirely convincing, this explanation does illuminate a struggle at the centre of his philosophy between two forces, one represented by the legacy of Reid and the other by the attractions of a newer relativity.

There are two reasons why this struggle should be seen essentially as Hamilton's attempt to rework Reid, however. First, Hamilton's purpose was to guard against scepticism (which had always been a motivating force in Scottish philosophy) as well as against the nihilistic tendencies of idealism. As for Reid, this entailed returning to the basic testimony of consciousness—or intuitional belief—as the legitimate starting-point for philosophy. It is in consciousness (or "the original spontaneity of intelligence") that Hamilton says the "primordial facts of our intelligent nature" can be found. In other words, common sense ("the truth of consciousness") is the "condition of the possibility of all knowledge" and any alternative doctrine "stands decidedly opposed to the voice of consciousness and

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<sup>69</sup> Hamilton, *Discussions*, p. 55; p. 65.

<sup>70</sup> Hamilton quoted in S. V. Rasmussen. *The Philosophy of William Hamilton*. London: Hachette Ltd Publishers, 1925, p. 72.



the natural conviction of mankind.”<sup>71</sup> Even his phenomenalism has a distinctly Reidian side, since the human mind (as a thing-in-itself) is logically inscrutable and mysterious: “the terms *mind*, *conscious-subject*, *self*, and *ego*... are all only expressions for the unknown basis of the mental phaenomena.”<sup>72</sup> Second, Hamilton’s reading of Kant is largely blind to the idealist implications of the critical philosophy and, remarkably, tries to recruit Kant as a fellow Reidian. According to Hamilton, Kant “apparently derides the common sense of mankind” without acknowledging that his entire philosophy comes to rest “on that very principle of an ultimate belief.” Therefore, he concludes, “His *Practical Reason*, as far as it extends, is, in truth, only another (and not even a better) term for *Common Sense*.”<sup>73</sup>

Whatever its shortcomings, Hamilton’s rehabilitation of Reidianism was undoubtedly influential. Even Herbert Spencer, who disagreed more often than not with Hamilton’s opinions, recognised how influential his thought had been on philosophical debate in the middle of the century. His doctrine of the relativity of knowledge, for example, attracted many mid-century sympathisers, including Spencer himself, who remarked: “To this conclusion every thinker of note has subscribed.”<sup>74</sup> In *First Principles* Spencer even makes it explicit where the theory originates: “The demonstration of the relative character of our knowledge, as deduced from the nature of intelligence, has been brought to its most definite shape by Sir William Hamilton.”<sup>75</sup> His own theory of the limits of knowledge—that “the reality existing behind all appearances is, and must ever be, unknown”—reiterates Hamilton’s position in virtually identical language, if without its Kantian overtones.<sup>76</sup> Thus the tradition of Scottish philosophy, as represented by Hamilton,

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<sup>71</sup> Hamilton, *Discussions*, p. 61; p. 63; p. 54.

<sup>72</sup> Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, I, p. 156.

<sup>73</sup> Hamilton, *Discussions*, p. 91.

<sup>74</sup> Herbert Spencer, *First Principles*. (1862) London: Williams and Norgate, 6<sup>th</sup> edn., 1904, pp. 50-1.

<sup>75</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 54.

<sup>76</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 51.



continued to play a significant part in the way epistemology was established in discussion well into the intellectually turbulent nineteenth century.

It is highly probable that Eliot herself recognised the importance of Scottish thought and the university system in which it flourished. *Middlemarch* makes a passing reference to the culture of the Scottish universities through a minor character, Christy Garth. Christy, who appears only briefly in the novel when on vacation from his studies in Scotland, receives “cheap learning and cheap fare” at an unnamed institution (possibly Glasgow University, as his mother remarks on his dishevelled “Glasgow suit”), where he pursues his work with the utmost scholarly seriousness.<sup>77</sup> Eliot’s characterisation of Christy Garth and the academic culture to which he belongs has no dramatic purpose so far as the plot of *Middlemarch* is concerned, and consequently can be read as a subtle commentary on the intellectual tradition of the Scottish universities. In the early 1830s, when the events of the novel take place, this tradition was shaped by the common sense philosophy of Reid and his successors. For anybody in Christy Garth’s position, the death of Dugald Stewart would have been a very recent memory and Hamilton’s inaugural lecture at Edinburgh would have been only a few years away.<sup>78</sup> As a product of this philosophical and educational culture, Christy is used by Eliot as a kind of shorthand for the qualities and values associated with Scottish thought at the time. These are qualities that the reader is supposed to infer from a contrast made in Chapter 57 between Christy and Fred Vincy, a character of similar age and status whose “tailoring suggested the advantage of an English university.” Unlike Fred, who lives precariously and ultimately fails to settle on any professional career, Christy is reported to be making “wonderful progress” by “giving lessons, [and] carrying on hard study at the same time.”<sup>79</sup> His promising academic future

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<sup>77</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 399; p. 572.

<sup>78</sup> For the definitive history of the Scottish universities in this period see George Davie, *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and Her Universities in the Nineteenth Century*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1961.

<sup>79</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 572; p. 573.

appears already to be taking shape ("He hopes soon to get a private tutorship"), whereas Fred is destined never to become a clergyman and ends the novel instead as an "unswervingly steady" farmer.<sup>80</sup> The Scottish educational culture is shown to facilitate serious thought and shared knowledge (Christy the student becomes Christy the teacher); the English university appears to have little intellectual or practical value for its pupil and in fact only interrupts his search for lasting happiness. The thumbnail of Christy Garth may be peripheral to *Middlemarch*, but importantly it expresses an attitude towards Scottish thought, and the institutional channels through which it was dispersed, that serves as a reminder of its status and significance more generally in mid-nineteenth-century culture.

### **Associationism from Hume to the Mills**

Of the three movements considered in this chapter—idealism, Scottish faculty psychology and associationism—none bears the trace of Hume more markedly than the latter. By the time of George Eliot's mature writing the language of associationism, as well as its habits of thought, had become a kind of unspoken orthodoxy in psychological discourse. Even its detractors grew to acquire its vocabulary and assumptions, as the examples of Stewart, Brown and Hamilton have shown, and it was not until the modernist period that an alternative model for understanding consciousness emerged to rival it. William James's 'stream' metaphor for consciousness, which he popularised in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), purposely carried the suggestion that subjective life flows in some unbroken current rather than being made up of serial, discontinuous units.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> While Fred Vincy's marriage to Mary Garth eventually ensures them "a steady mutual happiness," his fate is tinged with the sense of unfulfilled promise: "But when Mary wrote a little book for her boys, called *Stories of Great Men, taken from Plutarch*, and had it printed by Gripp and Co., Middlemarch, every one in the town was willing to give the credit of this work to Fred, observing that he had been to the University, 'where the ancients were studied', and might have been a clergyman if he had chosen." Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 832.

<sup>81</sup> "No one ever had a single sensation by itself. Consciousness, from our natal day, is of a teeming multiplicity of objects and relations, and what we call simple sensations are results of discriminative attention, pushed often to a very high degree." William James, *The Principles of Psychology*. (2 vols) London: Macmillan and Co., 1890, I, p. 226; see pp. 550-604.

Associationist thinking until this time, while dominant as a psychological language, had always been troubled by the charge of materialism, so James's metaphor (which, he emphasised, was only a metaphor) deliberately figured mental experience as a natural process carried along by an invisible momentum. But even James's psychology was associational, at least in a casual sense. The narrative experiments of literary modernists such as Woolf and Joyce, for example, which often are said to express a Jamesian psychology, depict human minds in thrall to unnamed laws of association (when Bloom follows the girl out of the butcher's shop in *Ulysses* he is drawn to her "moving hams," a thought which arises from the involuntary association of two images present in his mind, the girl and the meat in the shop).<sup>82</sup> Rather than seeing associationism as ending with the era of Eliot *et al*, then, it would be more accurate to say that it underwent a transition into new, modernist forms at the turn of the century—not least because the phrase 'stream of consciousness' was coined before William James by G. H. Lewes himself in *The Physiology of Common Life* (1859).<sup>83</sup>

Eliot's fiction, poised on the brink of the Jamesian revolution, also investigates how ideas, memories and desires connect in associative patterns to condition the way the world is perceived. At times in her work mental impressions are described as having a material solidity: "[Bulstrode] felt the scenes of his earlier life coming between him and everything else, as obstinately as when we look through the window from a lighted room, the objects we turn our backs on are still before us, instead of the grass and the trees." Like dense objects with physical properties, these memories "still kept their hold in the consciousness." Yet at other times Eliot's language seems to anticipate James's stream imagery: "But in Dorothea's mind there was a current into which all thought and feeling were apt sooner or later to flow."<sup>84</sup> These competing psychological languages suggest the

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<sup>82</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*. (1922) London: Penguin, 1992, p. 71.

<sup>83</sup> See Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture*, pp. 10-13.

<sup>84</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 615; p. 202.

different theories of consciousness that were in circulation at the time and their different answers to common questions: what kind of language is appropriate to subjective experience? Is there some objective structure which exists beneath the purely phenomenological level? Eliot's contemporaries, particularly Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer, answered these questions by posing them in new contexts—such as human physiology and evolutionary theory—but they did so only in order to reformulate or modernise the classical associationist position. In this sense, the empiricists of the mid-Victorian period were still consciously working in a Humean tradition.

Hume was not the first philosopher to discuss the association of ideas. Its history stretched back as far as Aristotle and Plato, and Hobbes and Locke were among the many modern writers who mentioned the concept.<sup>85</sup> Like many in the nineteenth century, G. H. Lewes recognised the unity of its historical development: “Had Aristotle really conceived the law [of association] as a law, he would have applied it to the explanation of psychological questions, in the way the moderns have applied it.”<sup>86</sup> Indeed, throughout this rich prehistory the theory of the association of ideas held to a basic principle: that mental experience is derived from simple sensory impressions, which over time form more and more complex compounds by being associated with one another, and that determinable laws govern the associating process which prevent it being merely random or chaotic. Hume, who was the first to make the association of ideas central to epistemology, proposed an imagistic theory of thought in which ideas (faint copies of original sense-impressions) were the privileged unit of currency. This necessitated theorising associational regularities, for without “some universal principles” these simple ideas would be “entirely loose and unconnected” and “chance alone wou’d

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<sup>85</sup> There are relatively few dedicated studies of the history of associationism. The classic account is Howard C. Warren, *A History of the Association Psychology from Hartley to Lewes*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1921. See also Jonathan Loesberg, *Fictions of Consciousness: Mill, Newman, and the Reading of Victorian Prose*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986.

<sup>86</sup> G. H. Lewes, *Aristotle: A Chapter from the History of Science, Including Analyses of Aristotle's Scientific Writings*. London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1864, p. 257.

join them.” Thus, for Hume just as for Aristotle, the laws of association constituted the mind’s way of organising itself and creating cognitive order out of the raw data it receives being in the world. Before ideas there is no innate psychological apparatus, only the predisposition to unite ideas by the “gentle force” of association.<sup>87</sup>

For Hume there are three such laws: resemblance, contiguity in time and place, and cause and effect. Collectively they account for the sequence of thoughts passing before the mind at any given time. Resemblance works straightforwardly: “in the constant revolution of our ideas, our imagination runs easily from one idea to any other that *resembles* it.”<sup>88</sup> Since this law is most clearly applicable to cases of visual resemblance, it indicates how Hume imagines mental experience to consist of a series of pictorial representations. According to the second law, contiguity, no such resemblance between ideas is required for them to be fused; rather, it states, the mind tends to associate ideas that occur in the same spatio-temporal vicinity. In other words, when contemplating a particular object, the mind may be led by association to think of another object that occurred next to it or happened at the same time. Finally, the law of causation says that ideas tend to summon the thought of their immediate cause or effect (“when we think of the son, we are apt to carry our attention to the father”).<sup>89</sup> If experienced habitually, the association of one idea with another in such a causal sequence will eventually harden into a belief.<sup>90</sup> To this Hume adds, for reasons that will become obvious, that “there is no relation, which produces a stronger connexion in the fancy, and makes one idea

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<sup>87</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, p. 12.

<sup>88</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, p. 13.

<sup>89</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, p. 416.

<sup>90</sup> The formation of belief, Hume says, is not “determin’d by reason, but by custom or a principle of association.” And causation, as an associating principle, is privileged over the two other types of relation with regard to belief formation: “But tho’ I cannot altogether exclude the relations of resemblance and contiguity from operating on the fancy in this manner, ‘tis observable that, when single, their influence is very feeble and uncertain. As the relation of cause and effect is requisite to persuade us of any real existence, so is this persuasion requisite to give force to these other relations... Contiguity and resemblance have an effect much inferior to causation; but still have some effect, and augment the conviction of any opinion, and the vivacity of any conception.” Hume, *Treatise*, p. 67; p. 76; see pp. 74–81.

more readily recal [sic] another, than the relation of cause and effect betwixt their objects.”<sup>91</sup> The simultaneous operation of these three modes of mental association (or “natural relations”) thus accounts for the transitions in thought which constitute the chain of conscious experience.

It has already been mentioned that Hume’s opponents, such as Reid, objected to the reductive aspects of this psychology. To argue that the spontaneity, density and irregularity of mental activity can be explained away by three universal rules seemed at best a damaging category mistake. But Hume had recognised this in the *Treatise*:

These principles [of association] I allow to be neither the *infallible* nor the *sole* causes of an union among ideas. They are not the infallible causes. For one may fix his attention during some time on any one object without looking farther. They are not the sole causes. For the thought has evidently a very irregular motion in running along its objects, and may leap from the heavens to the earth, from one end of creation to the other, without any certain method or order. But tho’ I allow this weakness in these relations, and this irregularity in the imagination; yet I assert that the only *general* principles, which associate ideas, are resemblance, contiguity and causation.<sup>92</sup>

In fact, even when in the “loosest reverie,” the mind’s thoughts are structured as a series or thread which conforms to generalisable laws.<sup>93</sup> Imposing such fixed principles on mental life seemed to Reid and his followers to place limits on that which is so restlessly variable and ultimately untheorisable. But to Hume it was central to his wider project in the *Treatise*: “if any thing can entitle the author to so glorious a name as that of an *inventor*, ‘tis the use he makes of the principle of the association of ideas.”<sup>94</sup> This was because his associationism has more than a narrowly psychological application. While it does explain the course of

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<sup>91</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, p. 13.

<sup>92</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, pp. 64-5.

<sup>93</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, p. 416.

<sup>94</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, p. 416.



psychological development and the emergence of complex higher abilities, the theory of association goes much further than describing changes in mental states. Its confidence in unchanging laws is analogous to, and indeed complements, Newtonian descriptions of the material world, in the sense that it applies similar principles and concepts to nonmaterial substance. Hume's account of the "union or cohesion" of two discrete ideas (regardless of which principle produces the bond) implies that mental association relies on some sort of gravitational force: "Here is a kind of ATTRACTION, which in the mental world will be found to have as extraordinary effects as in the natural, and to show itself in as many and as various forms."<sup>95</sup> As both a psychological and a material concept, 'attraction' expresses a fundamental continuity between the internal and external realms of experience—an idea which in the nineteenth century becomes such a prominent theme throughout intellectual discourse. In the *Treatise*, of course, Hume's priority is to write a "science of human nature", but he acknowledges that the principles of association are "the only links that bind the parts of the universe together, or connect us with any person or object exterior to ourselves" and therefore may be considered "the cement of the universe."<sup>96</sup>

Hume's associationism had other non-psychological consequences. Two in particular had a profound effect on Victorian thinking: the critique of causation and the question of free will. The former, which had far-reaching implications for science, was undoubtedly the more radical. By using the principles of association to dismantle the rational grounds for knowledge, Hume inaugurated a tradition of conjectural, hypothetical science which the nineteenth century would inherit (as will be examined in the chapters below, George Eliot's 'realist' narratives are also built up by inferential hypotheses and provisional truths, whereby judgments are continuously revised and open to revision; as one of her narrators puts it, "you must know how to draw your inferences, and not be a spoon who takes things

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<sup>95</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, p. 14.

<sup>96</sup> Hume *Treatise*, pp. 416-7.

literally.”)<sup>97</sup> Hume argued that causation is a kind of practical fiction brought about by the unvarying conjunction of two ideas in the same sequential order.<sup>98</sup> Their repeated appearance over a sufficient period of time leads, by psychological compulsion, to a belief in their casual interrelatedness or necessary connection: “’Tis their constant union alone, with which we are acquainted; and ’tis from the constant union the [causal] necessity arises.”<sup>99</sup> This impression of causation, however, is just that: an impression, which is to say, it pertains to the mind rather than to the objects from which ideas are derived: “The several instances of resembling conjunctions lead us into the notion of power and necessity. These instances are in themselves totally distinct from each other, and have no union but in the mind, which observes them, and collects their ideas. Necessity, then, is the effect of this observation, and is nothing but an internal impression of the mind, or a determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another.”<sup>100</sup> As a habit of the associating mind, causation can legitimately be applied only to impressions and ideas, not to the non-ideational world outside consciousness. The external world may exhibit behavioural regularity, but since it is “impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions” there is no way of telling whether or not this is the case. Thus Hume states, quite radically: “Upon the whole, necessity is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects; nor is it possible for us ever to form the most distant idea of it, consider’d as a quality in bodies.”<sup>101</sup>

In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Hume makes clear the devastating consequences of this view for scientific discourse, which is predicated on finding hidden causal patterns behind phenomena: “We say, for

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<sup>97</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 239

<sup>98</sup> Only the briefest treatment of Hume’s notorious concept is possible here. For a properly philosophical discussion of it see Tom L. Beauchamp and Alexander Rosenberg, *Hume and the Problem of Causation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981; and Galen Strawson, *The Secret Connexion: Causation, Realism, and David Hume*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

<sup>99</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, p. 257.

<sup>100</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, p. 111.

<sup>101</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, p. 67; p. 112.

instance, that this string is the cause of this particular sound. But what do we mean by that affirmation? We either mean that this vibration is followed by this sound, and that all similar vibrations have been followed by similar sounds; or that this vibration is followed by this sound, and that upon the appearance of the one the mind anticipates the senses, and forms immediately an idea of the other. We may consider the relation of cause and effect in either of these two lights; but beyond these, we have no idea of it.”<sup>102</sup> To infer from the succession of these two events that one produces the other would be to go beyond the facts of experience, since “the simple view of any two objects or actions, however related, can never give us any idea of power, or of a connexion betwixt them.”<sup>103</sup> Moreover, such a generalisation would utilise inductive reasoning, in so far as it would entail the expectation that all future occurrences of the first event will be followed, necessarily, by the second. But there are no logical grounds on which to base such a prediction. Induction, Hume shows, rests on a groundless inference, which cannot reasonably be justified: “There is required a medium, which may enable the mind to draw such an inference, if indeed it be drawn by reasoning and argument. What that medium is, I must confess, passes my comprehension...”<sup>104</sup> It cannot be based on the resemblance of past, present and future, because only experience gives knowledge of this resemblance: “It is impossible, therefore, that any arguments from experience can prove this resemblance of the past to the future; since all these arguments are founded on the supposition of that resemblance.”<sup>105</sup> Thus Hume undermines the rational foundations of general scientific laws in two ways: first, by demonstrating that causation is “not determin’d by reason, but by certain principles, which associate together the ideas of these objects”, and second by

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<sup>102</sup> David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*. (1777) ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge rev. P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., 1975, p. 77; see pp. 60-79.

<sup>103</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, p. 112.

<sup>104</sup> Hume, *Enquiries*, p. 34.

<sup>105</sup> Hume, *Enquiries*, p. 38.

showing that generalisations from particulars require inductive steps which defy logical justification.<sup>106</sup>

His own “experimental” method, which is outlined in the introduction to the *Treatise*, thus reconceptualises science in non-universalising terms. Science, for Hume, regardless of its object of knowledge, has to proceed tentatively by means of careful observation and experiment (“we cannot go beyond experience; and any hypothesis, that pretends to discover the ultimate original qualities of human nature, ought at first to be rejected as presumptuous and chimerical”). Mid-Victorian writers, living at a time when Hume’s challenge was still radically unanswerable, continued to be acutely conscious of scientific methodology and knowable limits. Take this statement of Herbert Spencer’s, for example: “After concluding that we cannot know the ultimate nature of that which is manifested to us, there arise the questions—What is it that we know? In what sense do we know it? And in what consists our highest knowledge of it?”<sup>107</sup> Spencer’s caution here, which has much in common with Hume’s own, is typical of other mid-nineteenth-century empiricists, despite empiricism’s reputation for confident, austere, inflexible system-building. Hume’s description of the experimental method is perhaps even more reminiscent of George Eliot’s novels:

We must therefore glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world, by men’s behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures. Where the experiments of this kind are judiciously collected and compar’d, we may hope to establish on them a science, which will not be inferior in certainty, and will be much superior in utility to any other of human comprehension.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, p. 64.

<sup>107</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 99.

<sup>108</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, pp. 5-6.

Eliot's narratives, when considered as simulated empirical studies, exemplify Hume's "cautious observation of human life." This is borne out by a well-known comment she makes in a review of Ruskin's *Modern Painters III*, which is close in both tone and spirit to Hume's remarks: "The truth of infinite value that he [Ruskin] teaches is *realism* – the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality."<sup>109</sup> This last phrase should be taken not as some naïve commitment to representationalism, not least because Ruskin's argument itself emphatically dismisses imitation.<sup>110</sup> In context, Eliot is referring to the idea of particulars; and the value of particulars, she insists, does not consist in their conformity to invariant universals (interestingly, in the opening pages of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin remarks in a similar vein that "[m]uch time is wasted by human beings, in general, on establishment of systems"<sup>111</sup>). Eliot's view becomes clearer in another essay: "The tendency created by the splendid conquests of modern generalization, to believe that all social questions are merged in economical science, and that the relations of men to their neighbours may be settled by algebraic equations...—none of these diverging mistakes can co-exist with a real knowledge of the People, with a thorough study of their habits, their ideas, their motives."<sup>112</sup> Such a knowledge is always in process rather than complete, its conclusions drawn cautiously from the 'experiments' her narrators conduct rather than from the fixed categories of rationally abstract systems.

The second non-psychological consequence of Hume's associationism—the question of free will—had social and political ramifications for proponents of the

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<sup>109</sup> George Eliot, "John Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, Vol. III" (1856) in George Eliot, *Selected Critical Writings*. ed. Rosemary Ashton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 248.

<sup>110</sup> Ruskin in *Modern Painters III* (as in all volumes) rails against art's "deceptive resemblance of reality." John Ruskin, *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*. (39 vols) eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, London: George Allen, 1903-12, V, p. 36. This argument is dealt with substantially in chapter 2 below.

<sup>111</sup> Ruskin, *Complete Works*, V, p. 18.

<sup>112</sup> George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life" (1856) in Eliot, *Selected Critical Writings*, p. 265.

'experience school' which also featured prominently in mid-Victorian thought. Associationism's unbroken chain of ideas and impressions, causes and effects, appeared to leave no room for human agency, and in fact Hume explicitly referred to the synthesising ego as a fiction.<sup>113</sup> If the self is no more than the sum of its parts, in the same way that a republic is no more than the union of several states, then all the volitional aspects of the human species—capacities such as will, choice and intention—can be explained away by the vagaries of associational trains and, by extension, the sensory world that produces associable ideas in the first place. This picture of the mind (and, more broadly, the self or soul) was, then, doubly deterministic, sacrificing personal agency to both psychological and environmental imperatives. Common sense philosophy, or any other intuitionist theory of mind, never had any such difficulty accommodating free will, of course, because the innatist's psychological structure was stubbornly hierarchical rather than horizontal or serial. Consequently, the question of volitional power remained a conspicuous weak-spot for associationism, which its nineteenth-century detractors exploited and its exponents tried to resolve.

The flip side of this question, however, had important socio-political implications for associationists after Hume. Where it lost ground to innatists, associationism gained favour with liberal reformers because it allowed for modifications in human nature and therefore in social circumstances. Without an essentialist conception of the self, which would endure regardless of the context in which it was placed, the theory clung to the possibility of a reformable human nature in a way that was appealing to progressivist writers and activists for a century after Hume. As he put it in the *Treatise*, "the same person may vary his character and disposition, as well as his impressions and ideas, without losing his

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<sup>113</sup> "The identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one, and of a like kind to that which we ascribe to vegetables and animal bodies. It cannot, therefore, have a different origin, but must proceed from a like a operation of the imagination upon objects." Hume, *Treatise*, p. 169.



identity.”<sup>114</sup> So, while associationism had to go to some lengths to theorise moral responsibility, it had the advantage of being oriented towards the natural, social and political realities that Victorian liberalism sought to transform. Unsurprisingly, therefore, as Rick Rylance has pointed out, it gained support among the “emergent community of middle-class, freethinking, urban radicalism” to which George Eliot and her contemporaries belonged.<sup>115</sup> A comparison of Eliot and Spencer is revealing here: both came from the industrial Midlands, though eventually settled in intellectual London, both grew up in strict non-conformist families and became religious sceptics in their adult lives, and both were fascinated by questions of environmental and evolutionary determination in their vision of human existence. Furthermore, they belonged to a group whose roots lay in Benthamite utilitarianism, which had been one of the movements most amenable to associationism in the early part of the century. Despite its famous problem of passivity, then, Hume’s psychology was peculiarly suited to progressive politics and found its way easily into the programmes of many mid-Victorian social reformers.<sup>116</sup> It was, as perhaps we should recall more readily, a subtly constructivist theory of identity.

After Hume, the theory of association split into at least two separate traditions. One of these was represented by the post-Reidian Scottish philosophers, especially Thomas Brown. Their gradual acceptance of its psychological premises certainly did not signal that suspicions of materialism had been eased, but undoubtedly it marked a turning point more generally in the way the mind was discussed at the turn of the nineteenth century. At the same time as infiltrating psychological discourse in this general way, associationism also developed as a

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<sup>114</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, p. 170.

<sup>115</sup> Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture*, p. 63.

<sup>116</sup> These ranged from William Godwin’s sympathisers to Robert Owen’s socialists to Mill’s utilitarianists. Ruskin, while not central to the development of associationist psychology (though, like many, he absorbed its language), held serious and progressive views on educational reform and reached a wide Victorian audience. See, for example, Francis O’Gorman, “Ruskin’s Science of the 1870s: Science, Education, and the Nation” in Dinah Birch, ed. *Ruskin and the Dawn of the Modern*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 35-56.

specific school through the work of enthusiasts such as David Hartley (1705-57) and his populariser Joseph Priestley (1733-1804). Hartley's *Observations on Man* is a central text in the history of associationism, not only because it extended Hume's position, but because it theorised explicit links between physiology and psychology which anticipated (and determined) the direction of later associationists such as Bain and Lewes. Like Hume, Hartley saw the association of ideas as a kind of gravitational attraction, which linked simple elements into complex clusters and thereby accounted for the formation of the psychological landscape. The analogy with particle physics was not trivial; his whole approach to philosophy in the *Observations* is self-consciously Newtonian ("This is the method of analysis and synthesis recommended and followed by Sir Isaac Newton"), and his theory emphasises the compatibility between materially-generated impressions (vibrations) and purely mental ideas (which are associational): "The doctrine of *vibrations* may appear at first sight to have no connexion with that of *association*; however, if these doctrines be found in fact to contain the laws of the bodily and mental powers respectively, they must be related to each other, since the body and mind are. One may expect, that *vibrations* should infer *association* as their effect, and *association* point to *vibrations* as its cause."<sup>117</sup> This was a departure from Humean orthodoxy, and perhaps one that Hume would not have welcomed, but Hartley retained many of the assumptions set out in the *Treatise*.

Mental experience, according to Hartley, is divided into sensations and ideas, the former leaving "certain vestiges, types, or images of themselves" in the mind which then give rise to corresponding ideas.<sup>118</sup> Simple ideas tend to aggregate to form complex wholes: "Simple ideas of sensation must run into clusters and combinations by association, and these will at last coalesce into one complex idea, by the approach and commixture of the several compounding parts." Intellectual

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<sup>117</sup> Robert Brown (ed.), *Between Hume and Mill: An Anthology of British Philosophy 1749-1843*. New York: Random House, 1970, p. 6.

<sup>118</sup> Brown, *Between Hume and Mill*, pp. 11-12.

ideas, which come to be formed almost exclusively by the principle of contiguity, and include "beauty, honour, moral qualities, &c.", are derived, in other words, from the most basic level of motor-sensory activity. Thus the defining traits of human psychology are acquired through experience rather than furnished natively:

One may hope, therefore, that, by pursuing and perfecting the doctrine of association, we may at some time or other be enabled to analyse all that vast variety of complex ideas, into their simple compounding parts, *i.e.* into the simple ideas of sensation, of which they consist... The complex ideas I here speak of, are generally excited by words, or visible objects, but they are also connected with other external impressions, and depend upon them, as upon symbols. In whatever way we consider them, the trains of them which are presented to the mind seem to depend on the then present state of the body, the external impressions, and the remaining influence of prior impressions and associations taken together.<sup>119</sup>

Priestley, massively impressed by Hartley, took this view further. His 1775 edition of the *Observations* was prefaced by a sizeable commentary on Hartley's text in which he celebrated his predecessor's extensive application of associational principles. To those principles Priestley brought a more scientific bent, and consequently a more materialistic development of Hartley's theory. While this attracted predictable hostility, he saw no contradiction between a thoroughgoing materialism and a religious cosmology, precisely because abandoning free-will can be seen symbolically to reinforce the authority of an all-seeing God. Such a marriage between science and religion was still a theoretical possibility in the eighteenth century; by the nineteenth, however, associationism had to tread with extreme caution whenever it came to theological controversy, and for this reason the likes of Priestley may unwittingly have harmed associationism's long-term credibility. Nonetheless, he was responsible for spreading the doctrine among the scientific community and popularising its empiricist psychology more generally.

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<sup>119</sup> Brown, *Between Hume and Mill*, pp.20-1.

Others who helped to do this included Abraham Tucker (1705-74), a London lawyer who thought of association as analogous to chemical fusion rather than particle attraction; Archibald Alison (1757-1839), whose *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (1790) placed associationism in a new aesthetic context; and Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), grandfather of Charles, who pursued Hartley's interest in the motor-sensory aspects of associationism. Howard Warren summarises their influence neatly: "Tucker spoke to the preacher and the moralist; Alison to the artist and man of letters; Darwin to the naturalist and physician; Priestley to the physical scientist."<sup>120</sup> Again, this illustrates that associationism was always much more than just a psychological model, and could be applied across the span of intellectual disciplines.

The main early-nineteenth-century exponent of associationism, and indeed a towering figure in its twisting history, was James Mill (1773-1836). His *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (1829) bequeathed to the Victorian period a classic and enduring statement of associationist theory. Its second edition some thirty years later, which was edited by his son, J. S. Mill, and Bain, carried many editorial amendments and additional notes, but this suggests more the adaptability of Mill's position than it does the redundancy of his ideas. While Hartley influenced all nineteenth-century associationists, Hume is truly the thinker that the *Analysis* recalls; its concern is for mental data, psychological organisation and the functions of consciousness, not the physiological causes of these phenomena (though, of course, the second edition was published at a time when such questions had returned to the foreground, not least because of Bain himself). Thus Mill's *Analysis* was a Victorian restatement of the classical Humean theory and yet, simultaneously, a pathway to the psycho-physiology of the 1860s and 1870s. In this sense, a tradition of associationism can be traced from Hume to the Hartley-Priestley school (and, in a parallel line, to Dugald Stewart and Thomas Brown) and

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<sup>120</sup> Warren, *A History of the Association Psychology*, p. 25.

then to James Mill (who consolidated the theory) and finally to the mid-Victorian writers contemporaneous with George Eliot: J. S. Mill, Bain, Spencer and Lewes. It is an indirect history, but one in which the presence of Hume can always be detected.

The continuity between James Mill's work and the later writers is pointed out by J. S. Mill in his preface to the 1869 edition of the *Analysis*: "I am far from thinking that the more recondite specimens of analysis in this work are always successful, or that the author has not left something to be corrected as well as much to be completed by his successors. The completion has been especially the work of two distinguished thinkers in the present generation, Professor Bain and Mr Herbert Spencer; in the writings of both of whom, the Association Psychology has reached a still higher development."<sup>121</sup> While the younger Mill recognised the limitations of his father's physiological knowledge, the strengths of the *Analysis* lie in its rigorous treatment of association and its transformation of Hume's theory into a complete psychological vision. According to Mill, the mind is the scene of continuous sensory activity:

Thought succeeds thought; idea follows idea incessantly. If our senses are awake, we are continually receiving sensations, of the eye, the ear, the touch, and so forth; but not the sensations alone. After sensations, ideas are perpetually excited of sensations formerly received; after those ideas, other ideas: and during the whole of our lives, a series of those states of consciousness, called sensations, and ideas, is constantly going on.<sup>122</sup>

The division of this influx of data into sensations and ideas is thoroughly Humean. Indeed, as the example of Hartley has shown, this classification became gradually absorbed into mainstream psychological language after Hume's *Treatise*. Equally Humean is Mill's basic principle of association: "Our ideas spring up, or exist, in

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<sup>121</sup> James Mill, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*. (1829) (2 vols) ed. J. S. Mill. London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1869, pp. xviii-xix.

<sup>122</sup> Mill, *Analysis*, p. 70.

the order in which the sensations existed, of which they are the copies.”<sup>123</sup> Ideas form trains before the mind in a “successive” order when they reproduce the original temporal sequence of an outward event (“The falling of the spark, and the explosion of the gun-powder, have the successive order, or order in time”). Alternatively, ideas may appear “synchronously,” which is to say, simultaneously, just as the originals occurred (“my sight of roast beef, and my taste of roast beef, have been frequently synchronical”).<sup>124</sup> Mill finds that he can explain Hume’s laws in terms of these two types of association, thus updating them: “Contiguity of two sensations in time, means the successive order. Contiguity of two sensations in place, means the synchronous order... Causation, the second of Mr Hume’s principles, is the same with contiguity in time, or the order of succession.” Resemblance, he argues, is merely the tendency to “see like things together” and so can be explained by a secondary law of frequency.<sup>125</sup>

Like Hume, Mill’s theory of the mind is therefore mechanistic. Metaphors of matter serve to explain the realities of consciousness. It rejects innatist principles and instead views the mind’s most complex events as reducible into the simplest elements, which are derived from experience and form a continuous series that is determined by voluntary, semi-voluntary and involuntary associational laws. For all its weaknesses and its moral opponents, these psychological premises became the standard way that the Victorian imagination conjured for itself a functional image of invisible mental life. It remained so late into the century, and arguably for longer than that, mainly because the associationist position (like the mind it described) was flexible and adaptable; it could accommodate changes in intellectual culture and effect considerable change in return.

Associationism, that is to say, found itself frequently battling with all theories of self, mind and knowledge that sprang from essentialist or innatist

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<sup>123</sup> Mill, *Analysis*, p. 78.

<sup>124</sup> Mill, *Analysis*, pp. 71-77.

<sup>125</sup> Mill, *Analysis*, pp. 110-11.



assumptions. Usually these were 'metaphysical' opponents, as we have begun to see. But brain localisation theories, pinning down mental powers to a fixed psychological organisation, were also included in its list of opponents. For the associationist, mental structures were emergent over time, rather than pre-existing experience. Selves, minds, perceptions, categories, ideas—none to the empiricist was essential, *a priori*, absolute or fixed. The point surfaces interestingly in a passage from Lewes's early novel *Ranthorpe* (1847):

The tyrannous influence of fixed ideas—of thoughts which haunt the soul, and goad the unhappy wretch to his perdition—is capable, I think, of a physiological no less than of a psychological explanation... And precisely as the abnormal affluence of blood towards any part of the body will produce chronic inflammation, if it be not diverted, so will the current of thought in excess in any one direction produce monomania. Fixed ideas may thus be physiologically regarded as chronic inflammations of the brain.<sup>126</sup>

Lewes's novel, unsurprisingly, is greatly concerned with human psychological habits. In this instance, the tyranny of "fixed ideas" refers to a plan settling in a character's mind to commit a murder. So the terrible prospect of fixity signals a failure of proper association, resulting in the hatching of a violent criminal act. We are not supposed to miss the ethical aspect of this pattern. What is interesting about the passage, too, among other things, is the way it introduces a physiological vocabulary to explain the effects of mental coalescence. For Hume, this would have been inconceivable; for Lewes, however, the physiology has both a literal and metaphorical significance in relation to associationism. Only an improved knowledge of circulation and respiration in the nineteenth century made writing a passage like this possible, and the body in general becomes more prominent in empiricist epistemology as accounts of its impressibility grow more detailed. Bain and Lewes himself were instrumental in this. But, in a more metaphorical way, the

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<sup>126</sup> G. H. Lewes, *Ranthorpe*. (1847) ed Barbara Smalley. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1974, p. 203.

narrator of *Ranthorpe* asks us to read his character's mind through an understanding of bodily structures. 'Fixed' ideas are equivalent to a clotting or calcification, and obstruct reasoned (and moral) judgments.

This moment in Lewes's novel, which overall remains tied in some ways to the conventions of eighteenth-century romance fiction, seems poised on the cusp of the mid-Victorian modernisation of the Humean tradition. It prefigures Lewes's own later psychological theories, which would revitalise associationism by grounding its processes in the knowing body. Evolutionary theory would also give a historicising context in which to frame that human physiology. At the heart of the parallelism of mind and body in mid-Victorian empiricism was a structural idea of instability that had sceptical consequences, for it too (like Lewes's novel) sought to avoid "the tyrannous influence of fixed ideas"—the fixed ideas lurking variously, for example, in Reid's common sense philosophy and in the idealists' mystically transcendent self—by extending Hume's powerfully critical premises of epistemology into this new territory. The ways in which mid-Victorian writers undertook this task remains now the focus of the following chapters, starting with its relation to the vexed issue of the realist aesthetic.

## Chapter Two

# Ruskin's *Modern Painters* and the Visual Language of Reality

The Ruskin of *Modern Painters* (1843-60) is a writer committed, above all, to an epistemological aesthetic.<sup>1</sup> Even as his work weaves digressively through cultural time and space, from mountainous Alpine landscapes to German philosophy, from the botanical structure of leaves to Medieval chiaroscuro, its narrative constantly enforces and exemplifies Ruskin's master theme: the specific capacity of art to know. "I am afraid the reader must be, by this time, almost tired of hearing about truth," he concedes midway through the third volume, acknowledging the centrality of that commitment.<sup>2</sup> His advocacy of Turner, so crucial to the purpose and design of *Modern Painters*, is indistinguishable from a pervasive preoccupation with the concept of truthfulness in representation. "For many a year we have heard nothing with respect to the works of Turner but accusations of their want of *truth*," Ruskin states, yet *Modern Painters* will recognise precisely that "Turner is like nature, and paints more of nature than any man who ever lived."<sup>3</sup> 'Truth', from the outset, then, both sanctions and sustains the narrative of Ruskin's fragmentary work.

How can this conception of truth be understood or characterised? What kind of a commitment to realism is at stake in Ruskin's text? The spectral presence

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of Ruskin's developing aesthetic theory in *Modern Painters* see for example George P. Landow, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971; Robert Hewison, *John Ruskin: The Argument of the Eye*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1976; Gary Wihl, *Ruskin and the Rhetoric of Infallibility*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*. (39 vols) eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, London: George Allen, 1903-12, V, p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, pp. 51-2. Ruskin's own emphasis.

of Wordsworth in *Modern Painters* acts as an important reminder of its connection to a fading era of romanticism, with its characteristic emphasis on imaginative apprehension, intuited transcendental order, and “introvertive mysticism.”<sup>4</sup> Yet the truth-telling aesthetic it theorises has no significant basis in the idealist philosophy that helped shape the development of romanticism in Britain. Ruskin, in fact, thought the metaphysical claims of German philosophers tended quickly to turn into nonsensical disputes over increasingly meaningless abstractions, and his disaffection with Kant mirrored that of Herbert Spencer.<sup>5</sup> To Ruskin, idealism meant addressing the problem of knowledge using extravagantly unworldly, if not wildly unsound, propositions, such as “talking of a ‘finite realization of the infinite’ (a phrase considerably less rational than ‘a black realization of white’), and of a triad composed of God, Man, and Humanity (which is a parallel thing to talking of a triad of man, dog, and canineness).”<sup>6</sup> Idealism, moreover, for Ruskin, strove towards a position that would de-ontologise the realm of the extrasubjective, reducing everything to a condition of possibility inside a priori forms of thought. Existences, in effect, were assumed to be conferred by pre-experiential modes of constructive or originary insight. He thereby imputed to it a devastating hubris. Recalling a visit to Mont Blanc in the third volume, Ruskin imagines how his experience of the mountain might have been construed differently by an idealist, not himself: “The conclusion which would have been formed, upon this [sight], by a German philosopher, would have been that the Mont Blanc *was* of no value; that he and his imagination only were of value; that the Mont Blanc, in fact, except so far as he was able to look at it, could not be considered as having any existence.”<sup>7</sup> For

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<sup>4</sup> This suggestive phrase, quoted by Peter Malekin in connection with Wordsworth’s “abyss of idealism,” was coined originally by W. T. Stace, in a discussion relating to a purification or absolute emptying out of consciousness: “what emerges [from introvertive mysticism] is a state of pure consciousness—‘pure’ in the sense that it is not the consciousness of any empirical content. It has no content except itself.” (See W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*. London: Macmillan, 1980, pp. 86-6.) Peter Malekin, “Wordsworth and the Mind of Man” in J. R. Watson ed. *An Infinite Complexity: Essays in Romanticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography*. (2 vols) London: Williams and Northgate, 1904, I, p. 378.

<sup>6</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, pp. 424-25

<sup>7</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 201; p. 184.

such a figure, *esse est percipi*: only by being underwritten by a percipient intelligence would the vast presence of Mont Blanc strictly be engendered, as if its existence followed the formal priority of an ratiocinative act performed by an individual human mind whose embodied physical presence it massively dwarfed.

His dismissal of idealism was impatient, sharp and sardonic, and it links Ruskin to other mid-century writers like G. H. Lewes, Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer, who were united intellectually by their alignment against what John Stuart Mill would later call the Germano-Coleridgean line of thought.<sup>8</sup> In an influential essay, Mill wrote unequivocally on behalf of his fellow empiricists attacking the Kantians' belief in "intuitions of pure reason":

The nature and laws of Things in themselves, or of the hidden causes of the phenomena which are the objects of experience, appear to us radically inaccessible to the human faculties. We see no reason for believing that anything can be the object of our knowledge except our experience itself; nor that there is any idea, feeling, or power in the human mind, which, in order to account for it, requires that its origin should be referred to any other source. We are therefore at issue with Coleridge on the central idea of his philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

As complicated, shifting and erratic as Ruskin's views on truth could be, this passage points to a historical framework of empiricist thought in which decisive aspects of his theory of realism can be contextualised. Gary Wihl has argued that Ruskin should be regarded as "the most important epistemological critic in English."<sup>10</sup> The epistemological cruxes that *Modern Painters* turns us towards, it will be argued in this chapter, need to be understood within this more modern, post-romantic context. For Ruskin, as for Mill, the realm of personal experience, sensation, and testimony provide the only genuine pathway to knowledge, and

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<sup>8</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge*. ed. F. R. Leavis, London: Chatto and Windus, 1959, p. 108.

<sup>9</sup> Mill, *Bentham and Coleridge*, p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Wihl, *Ruskin and the Rhetoric of Infallibility*, p. 2.

through it our capacity for aesthetic response and feeling cumulatively emerge. At the same time, the fullness or magnitude of the reality we experience is radically inaccessible to our limited human faculties. As Ruskin said, “you can always see something, but you never see all.”<sup>11</sup> In these ways, the ideal aesthetic standard repeatedly asserted by Ruskin’s theory—the “constant desire of and submissiveness to truth” realised in Turnerian landscape<sup>12</sup>—links *Modern Painters* with wider debates in mid-Victorian culture extending across the fields of science, philosophy and literature which were preoccupied with the possibility and conditions of sensorially-derived knowledge.

This “larger culture of realism,” as Jennifer Green-Lewis calls it, which construed the quest for knowledge in experiential rather than intuitionist terms, identified understanding with strenuous and disciplined observation rather than autonomous powers of thought or transcendent modes of selfhood.<sup>13</sup> *Modern Painters*, too, centrally thematises observation. It envisages its pursuit of truth not from a position of Manfred-like alienation from the fabric of the world, but as an obligation to observe its particular structures, contours and morphologies. Yet by the middle of the century these assumptions were indissolubly connected to a growing apprehension of reality—by the ‘realist culture’ itself—as proliferating, multiple, even resistant to the human efforts of measurement and symbolisation by which it was understood. As Michael Timko puts it, this “interest in the epistemological is a significant feature of the Victorian period, and serves to distinguish it from the Romantic.”<sup>14</sup>

In one sense, it is not difficult to find evidence of an anti-intuitionist strain of empiricism in *Modern Painters*. Ruskin’s well known and often cited credo—“To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion,—all in one!”—could easily be read as

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<sup>11</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 329.

<sup>12</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VII, pp. 250.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Timko, “The Victorianism of Victorian Literature,” *New Literary History* 6, 3, 1975, p. 614.



trying to displace traditional romantic epistemological authority in order to establish in its place the human faculty of sight and the penetrative power of observation.<sup>15</sup> Humble sight, when exercised diligently, Ruskin seems to be suggesting, is equal to these seemingly grander and more mysterious ways of knowing—poetic, prophetic, religious— even, perhaps, more powerful than them because not beholden to some higher, invisible or supersensible realm. That Ruskin borrows a distinctively visionary tone from romanticism itself only serves to ironise and intensify this gesture of displacement. Moreover, Ruskin has a deep and unromantic preoccupation with the value and authenticity of descriptive fact, most famously in “The Pathetic Fallacy” chapter. There, the critique of “German dullness, and English affectation” is at its most pointed.<sup>16</sup> Even a critic like Robert Hewison, who sees Ruskin’s aesthetic theory as securely affiliated to Wordsworthian humanism, acknowledges that “here... Ruskin parts company with the Romantic poets.”<sup>17</sup> But the importance of “fact” to painting and ethical life generally is a familiar theme throughout the whole of *Modern Painters*. “I shall endeavour to investigate and arrange the facts of nature with scientific accuracy,” he announces at the start of volume one, later adding: “I shall look only for truth; bare, clear, downright statement of facts; showing in each particular, as far as I am able, what the truth of nature is, and then seeking for the plain expression of it, and for that alone.”<sup>18</sup> Truth requires observational acuity, a “scientific accuracy” so deplorably absent in Coleridge, who, Ruskin says, confuses the physical attributes of objects with his own poetic will.<sup>19</sup> In place of facts, Coleridge’s writing emphasises the unscientific dreaminess of his own personality. Indeed, Ruskin felt “his best poems were feverish.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 333.

<sup>16</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 201.

<sup>17</sup> Hewison, *John Ruskin: The Argument of the Eye*, p. 73.

<sup>18</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 48; pp. 138-39.

<sup>19</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 206.

<sup>20</sup> John Ruskin, *The Letters of John Ruskin to Charles Eliot Norton*. (2 vols) ed. Charles Eliot Norton, Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1904, I, p. 21.

The idea of faithfulness to nature underpinning Ruskin's empiricist rhetoric here resonates with the kind of language used by nineteenth-century scientific naturalists like John Tyndall, who wrote in 1854 that "if a man be not capable of this self-renunciation—this loyal surrender of himself to Nature and to fact, he lacks, in my opinion, the first mark of the true philosopher."<sup>21</sup> George Eliot's novels, too, respond to this language. Echoing Tyndall, the narrator of *Adam Bede* (1859) speaks of being "obliged to creep servilely after nature and fact" during the well-known metafictional intrusion in chapter 17.<sup>22</sup> Like Tyndall and Eliot's narrator, Ruskin saw the attainment of factual knowledge as a process requiring the controlled repression of the self. In science, painting and literary narratives alike, the subjectivity of the knower was to be left behind, made to submit respectfully to the primacy of the external world rather than delighting in its own inspirational insight or sublime transport. This pattern, George Levine argues, is the defining feature of modernity's secular narrative of scientific epistemology: the discovery of certitude depends upon the effacement of the independent subject who seeks it, a condition he calls "dying to know."<sup>23</sup> Impartiality, reliability and detachment all require the extinction of personality, hence Tyndall's rhetorical theme of surrender and self-sacrifice, the *creeping* after fact in *Adam Bede* (the knower must go unnoticed, be silenced), and Ruskin's view that the highest truth in painting comes at the cost of the painter, who should seek "self-annihilation."<sup>24</sup>

Some critics have taken this demand to mean something like pure transcription or a call for objectivity. One must be annihilated so that nature may speak for itself; out of this annihilation, facts emerge purified of all traces of dubious subjectivity. Patricia Ball, for example, gives the impression that Ruskin is devoted unquestioningly to the given: "To the end *Modern Painters* upholds the

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in George Levine, *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England*. London: University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> George Eliot, *Adam Bede*. (1859) ed. Stephen Gill, London: Penguin, 1980, p. 177.

<sup>23</sup> Levine, *Dying to Know*, pp. 1-43.

<sup>24</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 23.

place of fact, especially natural fact, in art, and the duty of the artist to respect it totally. What he has to say about beauty and imagination is grounded in the honouring of fact.”<sup>25</sup> Catherine Belsey, similarly, argues: “for Ruskin the world of natural objects, of bare, clear, downright facts, is unproblematically given, accessible to experience, and able to be re-presented in art.”<sup>26</sup>

Without denying how Gradgrindish certain moments in Ruskin can seem, particularly when lifted from their original contexts, it is important to recognise that his epistemological arguments are much more nuanced and sophisticated than Belsey, in particular, will allow. His version of realism does not entail being in thrall to the given in the way she suggests. More careful scrutiny shows how ‘truth’, that highly prized accomplishment of art, is closely bound up in *Modern Painters* with a powerful critique of static imitation, mimesis, verisimilitude and objectivity. Indeed, realism, as an aesthetic practice, turns out to depend significantly (and paradoxically) on calling attention to its own distance from the real. The truthfulness of the work of art is not measured by how successfully it eliminates point of view, conceals contingency or establishes a subjectless representational space; it depends, rather, for Ruskin, on precisely the role played in representation by empiricist subjectivity. For, as we shall see, Ruskin’s theory of realism sees truth always originating in a view from somewhere, rather than nowhere, and continues to invoke the presence of the very experiential self who would be annihilated.

It is worth just picking up this point again in relation to chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, for closer scrutiny reveals it to share a similar position. The effect of that chapter is cleverly self-deconstructing, returning attention to the very personality whose repression is said to be necessary for attaining accuracy and truth. By suspending the storytelling, the narrator only luxuriates in the flexible possibilities of narrative itself, exploiting the freedom it gives him to halt, surprise the reader,

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<sup>25</sup> Patricia M. Ball, *The Science of Aspects: The Changing Role of Fact in the Work of Coleridge, Ruskin and Hopkins*. London: Athlone Press, 1971, p. 62.

<sup>26</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*. London: Routledge, 1980, p. 9.

manipulate or mimic opinions, defer expectation, adopt new points of view, disobey temporal sequence, respond to the suddenness of human whim—in short, to swerve away from fact and nature in a manner so capricious that it complicates his “servile” relation to truth. For the narrative language in that chapter twists and turns relentlessly with conjecture, speculation and gossipy conditionals:

And I would not, even if I had the choice, be the clever novelist who would create a world so much better than this... But, bless us, things may be lovable that are not altogether handsome, I hope? I am not at all sure that the majority of the human race have not been ugly, and even among those ‘lords of their kind’, the British, squat figures, ill-shapen nostrils, and dingy complexions are not startling exceptions. Yet there is a great deal of family love amongst us. I have a friend or two whose class of features is such that the Apollo curl on the summit of their brows would be decidedly trying; yet to my certain knowledge tender hearts have beaten for them, and their miniatures—flattering, but still not lovely—are kissed in secret by motherly lips.<sup>27</sup>

It would not be going too far to say that the narrator revels here in the freedoms of representational language in the very act of denying they exist. An almost joyful momentum carries the passage forward, quite at odds with its stern advocacy of neutral description. The whole chapter exudes this same jaunty energy, as if suddenly exhilarated by a sense of release from duty to the story (“It is so very rarely that facts hit that nice medium required by our own enlightened opinions and refined taste!”), as the narrator appears to relish his chance wilfully to digress or second-guess the reader’s responses.<sup>28</sup> But his display is not merely an example of the famous mirror of the observer being doubtless defective, as the narrator himself would like to think, but much more significantly an acknowledgement that knowledge needs to arise out of these partial and prejudicial conditions if it is to be recognisable *as* knowledge. This view, in fact, shapes the ethical pattern of the whole novel. Adam Bede himself, its virtuous and honest centre, whose name

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<sup>27</sup> Eliot, *Adam Bede*, pp. 178-79.

<sup>28</sup> Eliot, *Adam Bede*, p. 177.

connects him Biblically to epistemology and the original fall into knowledge, is tellingly a “partial judge” of human affairs.<sup>29</sup> Thus the chapter’s engagement with the scientific ideal of self-effacement is highly ambiguous. The pull of subjectivity intensifies in the very gestures that seek to eliminate its contingency from the scene of knowledge. And, likewise, Ruskin’s commitment to realism shares the ambiguity written into Eliot’s novel.

### **Ruskin Contra Mundum**

*Modern Painters*, in shape, texture and argument, can be considered an extended empiricist drama. Partly its dramatic qualities are down to Ruskin’s interest in particularity rather than abstraction, evident for example in his own evocation of landscape, and in his language of reality. In another sense, its drama occurs in the way its epistemology is fully integrated into the chaotic fabric of the work; that is to say, in the relation between Ruskinian ‘truth’ and the contingency of the text’s unfolding. Some critics have found this overall lack of cohesion problematic. As Quentin Bell memorably put it: “the task that he set himself [in *Modern Painters*] was impossible and he was bound to fail. But in the entire history of literature it would be hard to think of a more glorious failure than this.”<sup>30</sup> Yet rather than a failing, the incompleteness of its design carries serious significance. Later it will be suggested that this narrative quality correlates with its evolving thematisation of abundance, confusion and instability, its “multiple vision” of the real.<sup>31</sup> But it also relates to the way Ruskin imagines his own task as the advocate of Turner’s truth-oriented aesthetic.

The restlessness and sheer inclusiveness of the narrative of *Modern Painters*—its almost insatiable search for fresh examples, demonstrations, contrasts and counterarguments to illuminate Turner and the natural world—

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<sup>29</sup> Eliot, *Adam Bede*, p. 184.

<sup>30</sup> Quentin Bell, *Ruskin*. London: Hogarth Press, 1978, p. 62.

<sup>31</sup> Ball, *The Science of Aspects*, p. 96.

dramatises the considerable imaginative effort required to apprehend truth. The scale of the text implies the scale of the task. To appreciate the Turnerian ideal requires the cultivation of the senses, something achievable only through the gradual accumulation of vast visual experience, both of painting and nature, which Ruskin's narrative seeks to enact. Its rhetoric therefore has an educative force, inviting the reader into the work to lend assent to its growing mass of evidence ("I have only to request that whatever I say may be tested by immediate experiment").<sup>32</sup> As John Rosenberg points out, Ruskin almost overwhelms us by constantly recalling our minds to remembered or imaginable scenes: "*Observe, see, look* recur with obsessive frequency," he notices, "until the eye becomes exhausted from the sheer multiplicity of things held up before it."<sup>33</sup> What *Modern Painters* describes, in effect, is a process of steady mental growth, by implication one that Ruskin has already undergone (presumably unlike the implied reader), and which promises to end with an equivalent understanding of the truth embodied in Turner's painting. But that process seems also radically open-ended or unrealisable. In the closing paragraphs of the final volume Ruskin will declare that "[o]nly another Turner could apprehend Turner."<sup>34</sup>

Crucial, then, to the dramatic texture of *Modern Painters* is a basic narrative of discovery. But, since none of us *is* Turner, the fulfilment of that narrative is ultimately in question, which points to a larger theme encircling it: the notion of truth as struggle and deferral. Apprehending truth is difficult, challenging, even rarefied. It is neither easy nor intuitive to accept that Turner was the most truthful painter ever—this is the necessary assumption of the text and crucial to its epistemological structure, for it inaugurates the dramatic pattern that

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<sup>32</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 320.

<sup>33</sup> John D. Rosenberg, "Style and Sensibility in Ruskin's Prose" in George Levine and William Madden (eds.) *The Art of Victorian Prose*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 180.

<sup>34</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VII, p. 453.



moves from doubt towards knowledge.<sup>35</sup> Few people identify Turner with fidelity to natural fact because their own ways of looking at the world are lazily inattentive or underdeveloped. For Ruskin, the value of Turner's realism derives partly from its potential to be found objectionable, to offend ordinary habits of perception and public taste, which he says are "plunging deeper and deeper into degradation day by day."<sup>36</sup> Therefore *Modern Painters* has to engage in another struggle: a self-conscious struggle against the pressure of critical opinion and normative aesthetic value. Figured as a heroic battle—Ruskin *contra mundum*—this struggle against prevailing values is rhetorically constructed from the start with a striking scenic intensity.

The preface to the second edition of volume one opens on a blustering, animated note, developed into an extended sequence of martial allusions:

And now I find the volume thus boldly laid before the public in a position much resembling that of the *Royal Sovereign* at Trafalgar, receiving, unsupported, the broadsides of half the enemy's fleet; while unforeseen circumstances have hitherto prevented, and must yet for a time prevent, my heavier ships of the line from taking any part in the action. I watched the first moments of the struggle with some anxiety for the solitary vessel, an anxiety which I have now ceased to feel; for the flag of truth waves brightly through the smoke of the battle, and my antagonists, wholly intent on the destruction of the leading ship, have lost their position, and exposed themselves in defenceless disorder to the attack of the following columns.<sup>37</sup>

Where his language had been modest, even apologetic, in the original 1843 preface a year earlier, Ruskin has grown bold and rancorous. Behind these heavy-handed metaphors ("the flag of truth waves brightly") lies the all too familiar complaint of a writer embittered by unsympathetic reviewers. Like Turner himself, Ruskin faces a

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<sup>35</sup> Historically speaking, this assumption was entirely justified, as Turner's work was poorly received by reviewers of the 1842 Royal Academy exhibition, who Ruskin said "carefully repressed his perceptions of truth" (Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 389). For a detailed account see E. T. Cook, *The Life of John Ruskin*. (2 vols) London: George Allen and Co., 1911, I, pp. 124-30.

<sup>36</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> John Ruskin, *Works*, III, pp. 7-8.

critical world that will not understand him. But interesting here is the rhetorical scene in which this literary commonplace is set, and through which Ruskin's aesthetic philosophy will emerge. Gone is the polite, deferential tone of the first preface, where Ruskin had created an atmosphere of genteel amateurism ("I now scarcely know whether [or not] I should announce it as an Essay on Landscape Painting, and apologize for its lengthy discussion of general principles").<sup>38</sup> In place of that leisurely affectation, the second preface allegorises the controversy surrounding *Modern Painters* I in a vivid martial rhetoric. Now, instead, scenes of war appear before the reader's eyes as an unfolding spectacle of epic violence. We are thrust into a conflict already underway, and meant to feel its continuing ferocity, positioned by the text not as neutral bystanders but as involved spectators. We view the battle as if standing at Ruskin's side, recruited as his ally. And the passage leaves the reader in little doubt as to the scale and importance of the moment, for it is not merely any battle: this is Trafalgar, the most significant encounter in English naval history. Much therefore is felt to be at stake, while the eventual outcome of the conflict is already anticipated by the use of the historical parallel. The studied, even laborious, extension of metaphors tells us that his truth will prevail, but only after some heroic struggle.

Heroism, indeed, is a governing theme of the preface. While his martial rhetoric can be seen as a response to critics who had couched arguments against the first volume of *Modern Painters* in violent language themselves, such as the Reverend John Eagles writing in *Blackwood's*, Ruskin achieves here a deliberate and sustained theatrical effect quite unlike anything in the work of those detractors.<sup>39</sup> It is an audacious act of self-mythologising. Through the "smoke of battle" we detect the orchestrating figure of Ruskin, dramatised as a master

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<sup>38</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Eagles mocked that the volume had surely to be an "ironical satire" against modern landscapists themselves: "Their superiority to *all* the ancient masters"—that was too hard a hit to come from any but an enemy! We must measure our man—a graduate of Oxford! The 'scholar armed,' without doubt. He comes, too, vauntingly up to us, with his contempt for us and all critics that ever were, or will be; we are all little Davids in the eye of this Goliath." J. L. Bradley (ed.), *Ruskin: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, pp. 34-5.

strategist and seasoned campaigner, guiding his side to victory from a precarious position. He thus confers upon himself the status proper to a victorious military hero. Moreover, a markedly nationalistic discourse facilitates the expression of this heroism. Casting himself as the commander at Trafalgar, Ruskin clearly identifies with Nelson, an English hero unrivalled in the nineteenth-century national imagination. In no other figure of the period was the symbolic identification of man and nation more powerfully suggested. According to Robert Southey, for example, whose influential *Life of Nelson* (1813) conspired in the creation of this heroic mythology, Nelson's command to attack at Trafalgar "will be remembered as long as the language, or even the memory, of England shall endure." (Southey's own account of the scene positively savours Nelson's battle cry—"England expects every man to do his duty!"—and moves into an idiom of romantic nationalism to relish the moment: "Nelson's last signal... was received throughout the fleet, with a shout of acclamation, made sublime by the spirit which it breathed and the feeling which it expressed.")<sup>40</sup> Writing in the 1840s, Ruskin is therefore accessing an established English mythology in order to personalise the narrator-hero of *Modern Painters*. The grandiosity of the preface creates a heroic space in the text that will be occupied by this authorial persona, who insists that it is "the imperative duty of all who have any perception or knowledge of what is really great in art, and any desire for its advancement in England, to come fearlessly forward."<sup>41</sup> In these ways, the narrative of *Modern Painters* obeys a powerful autobiographical impulse, no less invested in self-mythology than his later memoir *Praeterita*.<sup>42</sup> Subjectivity is woven into its aesthetic theory, shaped by—and also in turn shaping—its formal design.

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<sup>40</sup> Robert Southey, *The Life of Nelson*. (1813) London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1951, p. 254.

<sup>41</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> As Bruce Redford argues, in *Praeterita* Ruskin "spins the raw material of his past into a highly personal adaptation of the Edenic myth." See Bruce B. Redford, "Ruskin Unparadized: Emblems of Eden in *Praeterita*," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 22, 4, 1982, p. 676.

The preface also recalls that other hero of *Modern Painters*, Turner himself. Ruskin's naval scene brings to mind the vast canvas of Turner's *The Battle of Trafalgar* (Fig. 1), the largest of his paintings and his only Royal commission. It was hung in St James's Palace alongside other works celebrating English victories



**Fig. 1. J. M. W. Turner, *The Battle of Trafalgar* (1823-4) National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.**

over the French, including George Jones's paintings of Waterloo and Vittoria.<sup>43</sup> The centre of the composition is dominated by the colossal presence of Nelson's flagship, the *Victory*, whose masts reach to the top of the canvas, bearing sails that billow out patriotically. Behind the vessel, the horizon crowds with ships converging on the battle, emphasising the scale of the conflict, while in the foreground a mass of bodies flounders in the dark churning water. A fallen Union flag floats ambiguously on the waves besides the drowning figures, at once a patriotic reminder of Nelson's fatal wounding and a reminder of the nationalism in whose name the carnage has taken place. The painting's use of colour also suggests this ambiguity, its fiery tones communicating the destructive energies of battle as

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<sup>43</sup> James Hamilton, *Turner: A Life*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997, pp. 217-8.



well as the explosive fervour of military conquest. Its lines of perspective, however, construct the scene as a momentous spectacle. As James Hamilton rightly remarks, "The viewpoint is low, at water level, so the ship and its backdrop of clouds tower over the viewer."<sup>44</sup> While it lacks what Richard Stein calls the "visible nostalgia" of Turner's well known later painting *The Fighting 'Téméraire'* (1838), which depicts the final resting place of another vessel from Nelson's fleet, its investment in a specifically English national mythology is unmistakable.<sup>45</sup>

By positioning itself within this frame of allusions, the founding scene of *Modern Painters* I works interestingly against two main principles of Ruskin's aesthetic programme. For one thing, these framing discourses of nationalism and heroism create a rhetorical effect opposite to that which Ruskin admires in "great art," which he says banishes "all that is theatrical, affected, and false."<sup>46</sup> More intriguingly still, Ruskin uses the preface to append a conspicuous dramatisation of the author to a text that will argue repeatedly for an aesthetic of self-concealment. Throughout *Modern Painters* it will be claimed that in the highest art the viewer's attention is led away from signs of an originating subjectivity towards a referential vision. That is, in the ideal work of art the figure of the artist/author should dissolve into the representational space of the painting or text by a feat of self-annihilation:

The artist has done nothing till he has concealed himself; the art is imperfect which is visible; the feelings are but feebly touched, if they permit us to reason on the methods of their excitement. In the reading of a great poem, in the hearing of a noble oration, it is the subject of the writer, and not his skill, his passion, not his power, on which our minds are fixed. We see as he sees, but we see not him. We become part of him, feel with him, judge, behold with him; but we think of him as little as of ourselves.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Hamilton, *Turner*, p. 217.

<sup>45</sup> Richard L. Stein, "Remember the *Téméraire*: Turner's Memorial of 1839," *Representations* 11, 1985, pp. 165-200.

<sup>46</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 22.

As the preface testifies, the same can hardly be said of Ruskin himself. Unlike Shakespeare, for example, whose presence he says is never felt behind the wailing of Lear on the heath, Ruskin is a highly visible figure in his text. Rather than receding behind a depersonalised discursive language, he steps forward from his work as a presiding consciousness or escort, rarely allowing the reader to lose sight of his singular narrative personality. Even in passages describing mountainous landscapes or the properties of clouds, Ruskin's persona inscribes itself in his imagined scenes at an intimate distance from the reader, directing our vision and guiding our responses to the objects it conjures. His call for authorial self-effacement occurs, then, paradoxically, within a text marked by sustained personalisation.

Ruskin's self-inscriptive strategy is more than merely a stylistic device or a kind of persuasive garb. Indeed, he would object strongly to seeing the form of his writing as neutrally decorative.<sup>48</sup> (As G. H. Lewes put it, style is "the living body of thought, not its 'dress', which might be more or less ornamental."<sup>49</sup>) On the contrary, the tension it introduces between visibility and concealment reaches to the very heart of his aesthetic theory in *Modern Painters*. The Ruskinian self acts as a mediating presence within the work because the entire vision of *Modern Painters* is tied to the idea of the developing human mind—that is, the mind of Ruskin, the reader and even Turner:

There has been marked and constant progress in [Turner's] mind; he has not, like some few artists, been without childhood; his course of study has been as evidently, as it has been swiftly, progressive; and in different stages of the struggle, sometimes one order of truth, sometimes another, has been aimed at or omitted... As he advanced, the previous knowledge or attainment was absorbed in what succeeded, or abandoned if incompatible, and never abandoned without a gain; and his last works presented the sum and

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<sup>48</sup> For an insightful discussion of this point see Ball, *The Science of Aspects*, pp. 69-72.

<sup>49</sup> G. H. Lewes, *The Principles of Success in Literature*. ed. T. Sharper Knowlson, London: Walter Scott Ltd, 1897, p. 125.



perfection of his accumulated knowledge, delivered with the impatience and passion of one who feels too much, and knows too much, and has too little time to say it in, to pause for expression, or ponder over his syllables.<sup>50</sup>

Turner's aesthetic is inseparable from his mental growth. Ruskin's emphasis, which falls on the dynamic development of his mind and on identity as an experiential process, is wholly empiricist on this point. He recognises how even apparently simple of facts of nature cannot entirely be separated from evolving structures of mind and identity. He sketches a trajectory describing Turner's aesthetic development, a process ending with Turner truly becoming Turner, in the sense that his later paintings (the truest, the most typically Turnerian to Ruskin's mind) correlate with "the sum and perfection of his accumulated knowledge." And he characterises the psychological movement explicitly as a "struggle." When we look at a Turner landscape we see more than just a virtuoso representation of a single visual instant; the composition also implies a vast body of innumerable perceptions leading up to that moment, a personal history evolving out of childhood sedimentations of memory, sensation, feeling and understanding. His whole psychological past manifests itself presently in the picture before us. For these earlier perceptions have been assimilated by the artistic self, stored, absorbed, transformed, enmeshed, so they participate vitally in the knowledge of reality expressed so adeptly in his sense of form and visual composition.

Turner's paintings attest visually to this evolved expansion of knowledge. He would not stand "above other men in knowledge of truth" unless they testified to a particular pattern of mental growth.<sup>51</sup> And so the "facts" he paints are not impersonal, affectless, or dehumanising, but instead indicate the specificity of the personality through which this knowledge has passed, and in passing gained authenticity: "we want the thoughts and feelings of the artist as well as the truth, yet they must be thoughts arising out of the knowledge of truth, and feelings arising

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<sup>50</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 611.

<sup>51</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 609.

out of the contemplation of truth.”<sup>52</sup> Truth, indeed, cannot be sought in isolation from thought and feeling. Here, once again, Turner is exemplary. His pictures neither disguise human partiality nor mask signs of mental inhabitation in the painted scene; rather, they serve as graphic testimonies of unique (often indeed consummate) moments of sentience. “[T]he distinction of his mind from that of others,” Ruskin writes in volume four, “consists in his instantly receiving such sensations strongly and being *unable to lose them*; and then he sets himself as far as possible to reproduce that impression on the mind of the spectator of his picture.”<sup>53</sup>

Ineluctably, therefore, in order to assign nature its heralded priority, realist theory must duly enlist the work of memory, emotions and the intellect. ‘Nature’ is exalted above the egotism of the artist, but Ruskin’s work demonstrates how that exaltation itself only arises out of considerable labour. It requires, precisely, an intense effort of subjectivity to suppress one’s own interests. It also requires cultivation of the self. Learned rather than automatic, this labour of observation implies a history: the eye must have a past if it is to apprehend truth. Infants, who stare innocently at the world, see it at first falsely, because their vision is untutored, barely formed, lacking the requisite degree of sensuous knowledge (hence the messy scrawl they produce when asked to draw a picture, evidence for Ruskin of their obliviousness to laws of perspective). Whole cultures or societies, too, were similarly derided by an imperious Ruskin as primitive or infantile. The Chinese (“children in all things”), the “eye of the red Indian,”<sup>54</sup> and the “Negro races” all share a deficiency in this regard, he argues.<sup>55</sup> Like children, their supposed immaturity inhibits what their eyes can see. Both, for example, display in their pictures an ignorance of depth and shade. On Ruskin’s view, the cultivation of an

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<sup>52</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 137.

<sup>53</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VI, p. 33. Emphasis added.

<sup>54</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, pp. 144-145.

<sup>55</sup> “[N]o importance is to be attached to opinions of [Negro] races who have never received any ideas of beauty whatsoever (these ideas being only received by minds under some certain degree of cultivation).” Ruskin, *Works*, IV, p. 69.

individual mind and that of an entire culture thus follow one model of development, each showing the same evolving entanglement of sight and experience: "And all the works [of art], whether of nations or of men, show, by their want of *shade*, how little the eye, without knowledge, is to be depended upon to discover truth."<sup>56</sup> True perception, on the other hand, requires that we see the world through a moving prism of experience, or the mutable structures of the observer's subjectivity.

*Modern Painters*, therefore, knowingly records the formation of his own "long-experienced eye," to borrow a useful phrase from the natural scientist Robert Jameson, whom Ruskin had read.<sup>57</sup> A passage early on in the fifth volume points directly to the way this Ruskinian identity has been formed in the course of writing the work, shaped by pressures of time and change:

The first volume was the expansion of a reply to a magazine article; and was not begun because I then thought myself qualified to write a treatise on Art; but because I at least knew, and knew it to be demonstrable, that Turner was right and true, and that his critics were wrong, false, and base. At that time I had seen much of nature, and had been several times in Italy, wintering once in Rome; but had chiefly delighted in northern art, beginning, when a mere boy, with Rubens and Rembrandt. It was long before I got quit of a boy's veneration for Rubens' physical art-power; and the reader will, perhaps, on this ground forgive the strong expressions of admiration for Rubens, which, to my great regret, occur in the first volume.<sup>58</sup>

This retrospective glance partly upbraids, partly excuses the earlier incarnation of the author. Briefly disowned, the author's past life is readmitted evidentially as proof of his long transformation. It encourages the reader to see the authorship of *Modern Painters* as a fragmented, uneven act dispersed across historical time, rather than as a teleological unfolding of meaning proceeding from a single and

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<sup>56</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, pp. 144-45.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Jameson, *Manual of Mineralogy*. Edinburgh: A. Constable and Co., 1821, p. 363. See Hewison, *John Ruskin: The Argument of the Eye*, p. 15.

<sup>58</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VII, pp. 8-9.

original intention. The text precisely does not represent a sustained or univocal utterance, the outpouring of one long and uninterrupted breath of composition. Instead, he draws attention to the status of its author as a historically varied, divided, multiple figure. The earlier self is at once Ruskin and yet also not him: the passing of time and the intervention of experience have introduced difference and division into subject and work alike. But the distancing has an important effect:

These oscillations of temper, and progressions of discovery, extending over a period of seventeen years, ought not to diminish the reader's confidence in the book. Let him be assured of this, that unless important changes are occurring in his opinions continually, all his life long, not one of those opinions can be on any questionable subject true. All true opinions are living, and show their life by being capable of nourishment; therefore of change.<sup>59</sup>

Ruskin, getting somewhat defensively into his stride, aspires here to a kind of self-legitimizing humility. His sentiments have a good deal in common with what George Levine calls the "hubristic modesty" typical of modernity's epistemological narratives.<sup>60</sup> This condition, Levine says, serves ultimately to shore up rather than unsettle the authority of the narrator in the story of the pursuit of knowledge. But its purpose is to disguise the more aggrandising implications of acquiring knowledge. Since the desire to know, in the Western tradition at least, has often brought with it concomitant moral pressures and consequences (mythically encoded as, say, Promethean overreaching or Faustian self-interest), modern epistemology has had to find ways of legitimating its overweening nature and securing trust in its intellectual authority. Descartes, in the *Meditations*, for example, tried to divert attention away from the possibility of self-interest, not just

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<sup>59</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VII, p. 9.

<sup>60</sup> Levine identifies this paradoxical condition, first, with Descartes, whose early use of the trope of modesty anticipated later strategies of self-legitimation, especially in nineteenth-century scientific autobiographies: "He wanted to do no less than describe the world with absolute authority. But he could so only by announcing at the very opening of the *Discourse [on Method]* that his mind is "mediocre" and that anybody can do it. That rhetoric is not merely a disingenuous preliminary to his epistemology: it is an aspect of it, as Darwin's (I believe more authentic) modesty was to be essential to his achievements more than two hundred years later." Levine, *Dying to Know*, p. 49.

by formulating a method of pure enquiry, but by making his own personal mediocrity a crucial part of his ambitions and stressing the quotidian simplicity of his task, which his narrative then realises in the form of humble domestic detail (the hearthside, the dressing-gown, the paper in his hands). In Descartes's case, as Levine shrewdly observes, the tangibility of these details, and the rhetorical use of the tangible in general, is "indispensable to establishing the authority of pure, transparent consciousness, so that it is literally necessary to move epistemology through narrative."<sup>61</sup> Any such gambit aspiring to advance supersensibly to the realm of essences and abstraction can only be made by also retaining a very human humility, yet one towards which the impersonal or transcendent voice would be utterly indifferent.

In a related way, a rhetoric of fallibility affords *Modern Painters* a means of establishing and sustaining its narrative authority. That rhetoric is no more a chance affair than it is in Descartes: it, too, constitutes an aspect of the text's epistemology. The "oscillations of temper, and progressions of discovery" which Ruskin says characterise the seventeen years spanned by *Modern Painters* are, quite designedly, humbling admissions of imperfection. He seems only too willing to disclose evidence of personal limitation. The vulgarity of his boyish tastes (his "veneration for Rubens' physical art-power"), the hastiness with which he began the unplanned work (he did not then think himself "qualified to write a treatise on Art"), and the raw, unrefined quality of his early zeal for Turner ("his critics were wrong, false, and base")—all of these gestures direct the reader towards the provisional ground of the text's author(ity). The origins of *Modern Painters* feel haphazard and impulsive, on the edges of authorial control and intention; modesty thus becomes a determining trope for the very occasion of the text. Yet, as we have seen with Ruskin's muscular preface, its aim of establishing the nature of truth in aesthetic representation entails ambitions that are almost exaggeratedly immodest.

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<sup>61</sup> Levine, *Dying to Know*, p. 62.

As in Descartes, the occlusion of subjectivity by means of the trope of modesty succeeds only in testifying to the prominence of the self within narrative demonstrations of the pursuit of knowledge. Both the *Meditations* and *Modern Painters*, as different as they are as historical and formal documents, draw on forms of autobiographical reflection to further their interest in knowledge and in their attempt to establish the ground of certitude. Ruskin's own identity is crucial to these tasks. As Mark Jarzombek argues, by the final volume Ruskin "has to renegotiate his identity at every turn of the page."<sup>62</sup> But, unlike in Descartes, the personal realm is not invoked strategically as an acceptably modest kind of narrative frame for its universalism. Whereas Cartesianism, importantly, has to issue in clarity and distinctness, *Modern Painters* relies methodologically on retaining rather than escaping its own historicity. Clarity and distinctness—the achievements of a pure or transparent consciousness—do not constitute primary drives of its narrative, at least not in the sense that they entail a constitutive need to leave behind the condition of being embodied in narrative. The Ruskinian self remains in important respects mutable, unfinished and bound by the limits of its own writing. At virtually the close of the five long volumes, Ruskin states: "Looking back over what I have written, I find that I have only now the power of ending this work,—it being time that it should end, but not of 'concluding' it; for it has led me into fields of infinite inquiry, where it is only possible to break off with such imperfect result as may, at any given moment, have been attained."<sup>63</sup> This ambiguous closural moment—coinciding with a relaxing of the compulsion to write rather than with the finalisation of meaning—suggests quite powerfully the close interdependency of self and text. The limitations of human understanding become incorporated into the open-ended textual structure, as the authorial voice evidently

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<sup>62</sup> Jarzombek's rather hurried argument addresses specifically the role of Turner's death (in 1851) in the text's construction of a viable 'Ruskin', a heroic figure whose task will be to rescue him from extinction by playing a sequence of different and contrary roles: cold scientist, impassioned admirer, wise philosopher, humble amateur. See Mark Jarzombek, "Recognizing Ruskin: *Modern Painters* and the Refractions of Self," *Assemblage* 32, 1997, pp. 77-78.

<sup>63</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VII, p. 441.



struggles to exert control over the epistemological energies mobilised by his own narrative. Ending arbitrarily, for reasons of sheer expediency rather than clarity or distinctness, *Modern Painters* remains unable to assert its recognition of truth unattached to the contingent plane of authorial subjectivity: "Much of [Turner's] mind and heart I do not know;—perhaps shall never know," Ruskin has to concede in the very last chapter.<sup>64</sup>

The trope of modesty, then, assists in the text's attempt to proceed autobiographically from aesthetic innocence to experience, and its open narrative shape is an important aspect of this effort of self-construction. Rather than aspiring for some anti-corporeal conception of 'truth', as in Descartes, the empiricism of *Modern Painters* conceives of the possibility of knowledge only in relation to the limitations of human subjectivity; there is no triumphant mastery of identity whereby the self is eclipsed in a moment of total understanding. This is in spite of Ruskin's insistent call for the artist's self-annihilation. Just as Nelson's sacrificial death at Trafalgar has the effect of tying him all the more powerfully to the meaning of that battle, so in Ruskin's theory the annihilation of the artist merely intensifies the relationship between work and subjectivity. This applies to *Modern Painters* itself, as much as it does to Turner's aesthetic. As Jay Fellows puts it: "For Ruskin, aspiring towards the condition of a whole self, is in fact nothing of the kind. He assumes a 'biped stance' towards his worlds... Often many selves, each with idiosyncratic preoccupations, Ruskin, with both public and private attitudes, is at least two selves."<sup>65</sup>

For the development of consciousness everywhere inhabits Ruskin's exploration of the external world of nature. The history of landscape is also a reflexive history of the observing self: a *bildungs* story of the eye. As Fellows also argues, his interest in natural topography answers an autobiographical impulse:

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<sup>64</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VII, p. 443.

<sup>65</sup> Jay Fellows, *The Failing Distance: The Autobiographical Impulse in John Ruskin*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975, p. 46.

“Ruskin’s history of the relations between landscape and its inhabitants from the classical to the modern period is a public version of his own shifting relations and attitudes towards landscape, from childhood to maturity.”<sup>66</sup> The descriptions of natural scenery become testimonies of self-cultivation:

Stand for half an hour beside the Fall of Schaffhausen, on the north side where the rapids are long, and watch how the vault of water first bends, unbroken, in pure polished velocity, over the arching rocks at the brow of the cataract, covering them with a dome of crystal twenty feet thick, so swift that its motion is unseen except when a foam-globe from above darts over it like a falling star; and how the trees are lighted above it under all their leaves, at the instant that it breaks into foam; and how all the hollows of that foam burn with green fire like so much shattering chrysoprase; and how, ever and anon, startling you with its white flash, a jet spray leaps hissing out of the fall, like a rocket, bursting in the wind and driven away in dust, filling the air with light; and how, through the curdling wreaths of the restless crashing abyss below, the blue of the water, paled by the foam in its body, shows purer than the sky through white rain-cloud; while the shuddering iris stoops in tremulous stillness over all, fading and flushing alternately through the choking spray and shattered sunshine, hiding itself at last among the thick golden leaves which toss to and fro in sympathy with wild water; their dripping masses lifted at intervals, like sheaves of loaded corn, by some stronger gush from the cataract, and bowed again upon the mossy rocks as its roar dies away; the dew gushing from their thick branches through drooping clusters of emerald herbage, and sparkling in white threads along the dark rocks of the shore, feeding the lichens which chase and chequer them with purple and silver.<sup>67</sup>

The verbal performance here is arrestingly dense and dramatic, woven intricately into the shape of a single sentence, which forms an invitation to the reader to share in a singularly rigorous act of perception. Ruskin’s visual language of reality—so replete with sensory information and amassed detail, with contrasts of colour and light, with evidence of bursting, gushing, sparkling, curdling, shuddering,

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<sup>66</sup> Fellows, *The Failing Distance*, p. ix.

<sup>67</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, pp. 529-30.

dripping—appears to reconstitute in language an almost impossibly demanding moment of observation. At the very edge of visual possibility, the wealth of detail threatens to overwhelm us, even to exceed the writer's own descriptive powers; but, unmistakeably, implied everywhere in the scene is a consummate eye of experience—a self capable of organising these impressions into a coherent and communicable vision. It is as much a dramatic account of perception itself as it is a record of a dramatic natural spectacle; Ruskin's own exceptionally studious dedication to describing the Schaffhausen Falls only confirms the singularity of his perspective. That is, its exemplarity returns our attention to the subjectivity of the viewer. Moreover, the rich, subtly ordered verbal texture points emphatically to an unusually developed kind of consciousness from which these observations have sprung, to mature powers of attention, memory, concentration and verbal facility, or, we might say, to advanced signatures of feeling, to adapt a term from G. H. Lewes. As John Rosenberg argues, the prose of *Modern Painters* in examples such as this “reflects both the contours of the landscape and the inner geography of Ruskin's mind.”<sup>68</sup> In this sense, the passage describes a moment on Ruskin's autobiographical journey towards Turner's ideal aesthetic.<sup>69</sup>

A further example of the interpenetration of self and landscape has been given by George Hersey, who explains it in relation to a self-portrait by Ruskin dating from 1874. In the picture, Ruskin renders himself in rough, blocky washes of watercolour, very much in the style he might have chosen for rendering mountain scenery in one of his own sketches or illustrations. Effectively, it visualises himself, the creative artist, in terms borrowed from the natural world—“a portrait of the artist as landscape.”<sup>70</sup> At the same time, Hersey suggests, the painting shows Ruskin staring back out at the viewer with an undeniable intensity, making it

<sup>68</sup> Rosenberg, “Style and Sensibility in Ruskin's Prose,” p. 187.

<sup>69</sup> Patricia Ball examines the Turnerian aspects of the Schaffhausen Falls passage, particularly its strong sense of visual relationship and formal urgency, pointing out that Ruskin “makes [Turner's] work the standard for his own verbal art.” Ball, *The Science of Aspects*, p. 86.

<sup>70</sup> George L. Hersey, “Ruskin as an Optical Thinker” in John Dixon Hunt and Faith M. Holland, eds. *The Ruskin Polygon: Essays on the Imagination of John Ruskin*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982, p. 44.

equally a portrait of the artist as a seer. The portrait thus captures a kind of double knowledge: at once it suggests the way landscape has played a decisive role in the formation of his identity, while also seeming to claim (as he stares simultaneously at himself and at the world) that one cannot separate what we know of physical reality from our contingent biographical self. It becomes an irresolvable formal tension: does the painting show the self dissolving into landscape, or vice versa? In its problematic form, the portrait—like *Modern Painters*—suggests a human, relative and conditional conception of knowledge. And this is crucial to Ruskin's project. If it is to be attained, the 'truth' so centrally at stake in *Modern Painters* rests upon a reflexivity that revives the subjective conditions purported to stand in the way of a realistic knowledge of landscape. Or, to use a phrase of George Levine's, Ruskin's text "explores the possibility of selflessness derived from the energies of egoism. Egotistically annihilating egoism, the heroic figure might at last gain access to a world that is not self, learn from and do justice to that 'other' who lies just beyond the walls of ego."<sup>71</sup> Realism, as Ruskin imagines it, entails precisely this empiricist gesture.

### **Against Mindless Imitation**

As we have seen, 'truth' for Ruskin supplies the ultimate test for any work of art, and *Modern Painters* concerns itself at every turn with establishing the meaning of that claim. At times it seems the simplest of conceivable tests: "This is still the only question for the artist, or for us:—'Is it a fact? Are things really so?'"<sup>72</sup> But the unfolding epistemology staged in Ruskin's work delegitimises the straightforwardly referential assumptions informing this criterion, not least because 'truth' is often aligned at a rhetorical level with struggle and deferral, not simplicity. Moreover, at other points in the argument the primacy of realism becomes connected to a sceptical set of claims of a philosophically nuanced kind:

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<sup>71</sup> Levine, *Dying to Know*, p. 177.

<sup>72</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 179.

Truth may be stated by any signs or symbols which have a definite signification in the minds of those to whom they are addressed, although such signs be themselves no image nor likeness of anything. Whatever can excite in the mind the conception of certain facts, can give ideas of truth, though it be in no degree the imitation or resemblance of those facts. If there be—we do not say there is,—but if there be in painting anything which operates, as words do, not by resembling anything, but by being taken as a symbol and substitute for it, and thus inducing the effect of it, then this channel of communication can convey uncorrupted truth, though it do not in any degree resemble the facts whose conception it induces. But ideas of imitation, of course, require the likeness of the object.<sup>73</sup>

This key passage appears relatively early on (it comes from the ‘Of Ideas of Truth’ chapter in the first volume), and it has several significant aspects. First, we should note, the argument being proposed here seeks to account for truth not as property of painting in the first instance, but as a psychological question. It deals directly with epistemology—with the nature and possibility of knowledge—as a philosopher of mind might deal with it, which is to say, in a manner presently unconnected to the intrinsic formal truthfulness of a work of art. At this juncture, painted forms themselves have a secondary importance. Certainly, the worthiest paintings, such as those of Turner, have the propensity to give rise to ideas of truth in the mind of the viewer, but Ruskin’s immediate concern is with the nature of those ideas and that subjective process. He is approaching the question of visual representation by first establishing a prior theoretical framework of mental representation; ‘idea’, here, it should be emphasised, carries a traditional eighteenth-century meaning in as much as it signifies a sensory-based mental impression.<sup>74</sup> This extension of

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<sup>73</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, pp. 104-5.

<sup>74</sup> Gary Wihl notes that W. G. Collingwood’s 1893 study of Ruskin established the view that Locke, in particular, is the philosopher *Modern Painters* follows here in its terminology, but Wihl reminds us that this might be to take Ruskin’s ‘idea’ too narrowly: “At the same time, it is equally obvious that, properly speaking, Locke has very little to do with the opening scheme [of the work]. Locke provides the crucial definition of the term ‘Idea’, on which the entire theoretical introduction rests, but hardly the content of any of the specific ideas.” Wihl, *The Rhetoric of Infallibility*, p. 4.

empiricist orthodoxy thus becomes a crucial part of the philosophical groundwork of Ruskin's aesthetics of realism.

Secondly, the passage conveys an important sense of the arbitrariness of the signifying medium through which ideas of truth are mobilised. Its theory of representation, both aesthetic and mental, does not identify truthfulness with mimetic reproduction or duplication: a painted image, or an ideational structure in the mind, may be wholly unlike its particular signified. Truth does not consist in a perfect resemblance between idea, image and object. Instead, truthfulness is equivalent to "a definite signification" of symbols or signs. And to illustrate this point, Ruskin invokes language as an example of arbitrary signification, for words do not derive signifying power from having an intrinsic resemblance to anything in the actual world of objects. They are not imitative in this sense, and therefore the reader is encouraged to envisage how a similar arbitrariness may operate in the signification of painting, too (Ruskin, long before Saussure, we should observe, has an appreciation of the autonomy of the linguistic system). A painted composition also may generate ideas of truth without possessing an intrinsic referential connection to the world beyond it. That possibility, too, stems from Ruskin's empiricist conviction that ideas of truth are not merely internal replicas of external facts.

A third (and related) point emerges at the tail end of the passage: "But ideas of imitation, of course, require the likeness of the object." Explicitly and deliberately, Ruskin enforces an opposition between painting that aspires to be truthful, or realist, and the merely imitative work. Realism, it transpires, is defined in opposition to imitation. The distinction is retained throughout the whole of *Modern Painters*, and its significance is vital to an understanding of Ruskin's epistemological engagement. By imitation, Ruskin means a mode of art that seeks to abolish the hiatus between the representation and the represented, between image and object: it is a flawless art of verisimilitude, a perfectly rendered illusion



of reality, or *trompe l'oeil*. It stands for a maximal 'realism' in the everyday sense of the word. A good example of imitation would be a typical Canaletto painting, for instance, which desires such a proximity to the real that it seems unwilling to declare its own status as a material image applied to canvas. A Canaletto, for Ruskin, indeed, marks "the most servile and mindless imitation."<sup>75</sup>

As it praises Turner, then, the broader argument of *Modern Painters* has also correspondingly to condemn imitation, which it sees as a coarsening and deceptive representational claim. "The ideas and pleasures [of imitation] are the most contemptible which can be received from art," Ruskin argues.<sup>76</sup> Why, we might ask, does Ruskin find imitation so objectionable or inferior? Why should someone so preoccupied by truth, realism, knowledge and observational sobriety seek to condemn art that aspires for this closeness to the real? One answer is that Ruskin considers imitation to be ultimately duplicitous. Such perfect translation being impossible, the imitative work pretends through a feat of visual trickery to *become* what it depicts. It cleverly causes the viewer of the painting to confuse ontological realms: suddenly work and world seem ideally to coincide. However, the fulfilment of its effect occurs at precisely the point when the ontological spell breaks, uncovering the illusion. At this crucial moment, when aesthetic pleasure in the picture intensifies, the image and the real regain their distinctiveness in such a way that the act of deception can manifest itself—that is, suddenly we see the trick. Our pleasure now derives from appreciating the technical skill that went into creating the two-dimensional illusion of depth; it does not derive from a heightened knowledge of the world portrayed. As Ruskin explains: "the degree of the pleasure depends on the degree of difference and the perfection of the resemblance, not on the nature of the thing resembled. The simple pleasure in the

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<sup>75</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 215.

<sup>76</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 101.

imitation would be precisely of the same degree (if the accuracy could be equal), whether the subject of it were the hero or his horse.”<sup>77</sup>

Imitation therefore becomes doubly objectionable, as Ruskin defines it. On the one hand, it effaces itself before the viewer as a mediating artifice, and then, on the other, it revels triumphantly in its own powers of visual deception, thereby raising the trickery into an overt theme. As Caroline Levine argues: “In short, the more conventionally ‘realistic’ the image, the less the work of art will tell us about the object it portrays. Whenever painting pretends to be the object it represents, the pretense itself becomes the sole subject-matter of the work.”<sup>78</sup> Such is the thrust of Ruskin’s critique: ironically, the more like a real thing the painting becomes, the less truthful it must be. At its most veracious, the work of imitation exposes its profound falsity. And its pleasure comes, ignobly, “not from the contemplation of a truth, but from the discovery of a falsehood.”<sup>79</sup> In contrast to the imitative painting, a marble sculpture, say, already registers in its very form a conscious awareness of its distance from the represented world:

[F]or a marble figure does not look like what it is not: it looks like marble, and like the form of a man, but then it *is* marble, and it *is* the form of a man. It does not look like a man, which it is not, but like the form of a man, which it is. Form is form, *bona fide* and actual, whether in marble or in flesh—not an imitation or resemblance of form, but real form. The chalk outline of the bough of a tree on paper, is not an imitation; it looks like chalk and paper—not like wood, and that which it suggests to the mind is not properly said to be *like* the form of a bough, it *is* the form of a bough.<sup>80</sup>

Ruskin’s preference for hewn marble over *trompe l’oeil* shows how he puts the question of the materiality of the signifier at the heart of his critique of imitation. Truthful art or realism, unlike this ultra-mimesis, never disguises or

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<sup>77</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 101.

<sup>78</sup> Caroline Levine, “Seductive Reflexivity: Ruskin’s Dreaded Trompe l’oeil,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, 4, 1998, p. 368.

<sup>79</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 108.

<sup>80</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 101.

attempts to transcend the realm of the sign. On the contrary, the best painter, Ruskin says, “wishes to put into his work as much truth as possible, and yet to keep it looking *un-real*.”<sup>81</sup> Standing before one of Turner’s canvases, we will never be able to forget that we are examining a image constructed out of paint on a flat surface; indeed, its ‘unreality’ will contribute crucially, if paradoxically, to its successful execution of his quintessential realism. For the genuinely truthful work always refuses to disavow its own status as artifice. This requires, Ruskin argues, that the realist *not* make the representation seem real:

And thus, so far from its being at all an object to the painter to make his work look real, he ought to dread such a consummation as the loss of one of its most precious claims upon the heart. So far from striving to convince the beholder that what he sees is substance, his mind should be to what he paints as the fire to the body on the pile, burning away the ashes, leaving the unconquerable shade—an immortal dream. So certain is this, that the slightest local success in giving the deceptive appearance of reality—the imitation, for instance, of the texture of a bit of wood, with its grain in relief—will instantly destroy the charm of a whole picture.<sup>82</sup>

One of the ironies of Ruskin’s position, historically speaking, is that this kind of argument expresses a view that has since become virtually an article of faith in postmodernist criticism, which has tended to denounce ‘realism’ (Ruskin’s included) as a set of pitifully naïve representational strategies predicated on “a particular way of looking at art and life as though there was a direct correspondence between the two.”<sup>83</sup> John Mepham, for example, writes: “Postmodernist fiction repudiates this impossible dream and does all it can to advertise ‘textuality’. It points towards the future because it is part of the grand narrative of emancipation from past illusions (realism, mimesis) and is based on a more sophisticated philosophical grasp of the relations between language and

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<sup>81</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 186.

<sup>82</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 185.

<sup>83</sup> Alison Lee, *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1990, p. 3.

reality.”<sup>84</sup> A version of this argument might easily be extended to self-referential visual art in the twentieth century. What these criticisms fail to acknowledge is that realism, at least for a writer like Ruskin, never entailed those alleged first-order assumptions to begin with, however rigorously the sophisticated aesthetics of postmodernity call them into question. Victorian literary and philosophical culture was much too epistemologically astute and self-conscious for that to obtain. More problematic still, Ruskin’s theorisation of realism presciently shares their scepticism towards notions of pure referentiality: the work of art, he states, “has in some measure even an advantage with us in not being real.”<sup>85</sup>

Ruskin’s own argument against imitation or *trompe l’oeil* has a historical dimension, too. Rather like some postmodern criticism, he identifies modernity in general, from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, with the domination of imitation as a cultural paradigm.<sup>86</sup> “There was probably never a period in which the influence of art over the minds of men seemed to depend less on its merely *imitative* power,” he claims, “than the close of the thirteenth century.”<sup>87</sup> Medieval chiaroscuro, Ruskin notes, tended to pursue fantastical effects rather than an authentic resemblance of reality, and openly distanced the work from the world. But the overwhelming majority of art and criticism since then, with the rare exception of Turner, has sought fixatedly after deceptive resemblance and imitation. His trawling through historical examples of paintings, genres, styles and schools confirms it: “I cannot remember any writer [on art], not professedly artistical, who has not, more or less, in one part of his book or another, countenanced the idea that the great end of art is to produce a deceptive

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<sup>84</sup> John Mepham, “Narratives of Postmodernism” in Edmund Smyth, ed. *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*. London: Batsford, 1991, p. 152.

<sup>85</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 184.

<sup>86</sup> Elizabeth Ermarth, for example, has argued that realism belongs to the mainstream of European humanist culture after the Renaissance, as a set of conventions assuming the homogeneity of time and space. It thus refers to cultural shifts long before the rise of high realism in the nineteenth-century novel, and her argument relies on a sustained contrast between Medieval and post-Renaissance modes of representation. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, pp. 3-37.

<sup>87</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 37.

resemblance of reality.”<sup>88</sup> Canaletto is far from unique as a mindless imitator: “everything that [Cuyp, Poussin, Claude] can do is done for deception,” and they epitomise the “melancholy and monotonous transcripts of [nature] which alone can be received from the old school of art.”<sup>89</sup> Collectors of Dutch painting do not escape censure, either; they merely “enjoy seeing what is flat made to look round, exactly as a child enjoys a trick of legerdemain.”<sup>90</sup>

The iconoclastic energy of *Modern Painters* devotes itself to uncovering this history of deception and aesthetic falsehood, preparing the way for us to see Turner, instead, as the apotheosis of truthful representation. Ruskin’s realism thus implies a radical historical realignment. It also demands that realism be distinguished from other referential discourses or practices, such as photography and topographical illustration. It has become commonplace to see photography, especially, as closely bound up in the nineteenth century with a scientific culture of realism and objectivity. In the sense that it seems to promise an authentic and direct description of reality, the photograph is widely assumed to have become a benchmark for visual representation, the medium above all others that most fulfilled the Victorian’s pervasive appetite for realism. Jennifer Tucker, for instance, refers to “the nineteenth century’s belief in the power of photographic technology to replicate the act of unmediated seeing, to eliminate human prejudice, and to minimize the errors that allegedly vitiated the objectivity of drawings.”<sup>91</sup> These qualities ensured that the photographic image became “the norm of truthfulness in representation.”<sup>92</sup> Photography, the argument goes, increasingly defined the terms in which the aesthetico-epistemological issue of realism was debated in Victorian culture. As Jennifer Green-Lewis puts it: “What realism ought

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<sup>88</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 36.

<sup>89</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 168.

<sup>90</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, pp. 36-37.

<sup>91</sup> Jennifer Tucker, “Photography as Witness, Detective and Imposter: Visual Representation in Victorian Science” in Bernard Lightman, ed. *Victorian Science in Context*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 380.

<sup>92</sup> William Mills Ivins Jnr, *Prints and Visual Communication*. London: Routledge, 1953, p. 94; quoted by Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians*, p. 38.

to do and what it was actually capable of were topics for which photography was able to provide confirmation.”<sup>93</sup> Over time, the photographic image acquired representational authority and credibility, predicated crucially on its reputation for disinterestedness and detailed verisimilitude. It became “a yardstick of reality” for a nineteenth-century culture “increasingly obsessed with the real.”<sup>94</sup>

For Ruskin, and for empiricists like G. H. Lewes, however, photography did not carry this signature of reality. For them, it was neither the norm for truthfulness in representation, nor a paradigm on which other realisms had to be modelled. The photographic image, in fact, embodied certain epistemological assumptions about the nature of reality and its representation that empiricism sought repeatedly to undermine. Like a Canaletto, it was another grave example of mindless imitation. That is, it was a dubious enterprise precisely because it tried so hard to neutralise the role of the human mediation in order to establish transparent visual knowledge—and so, therefore, it was ‘mindless’ in the quite literal sense of circumventing consciousness. Ruskin did recognise, to some extent, the merits of photographic reproduction; he notes in the Preface to the third volume of *Modern Painters*, for example, that the advent of photography has allowed him to include fewer factual illustrations of landscape than in the earlier volumes.<sup>95</sup> But while useful for narrow factual tasks such as this, photography *per se* represented things falsely, not realistically: “Photography... misses certain of the utmost subtleties of natural *effect* (which are often the things that Turner has chiefly aimed at), while it renders subtleties of *form* which no human hand could achieve.”<sup>96</sup> Lewes, too, saw that photography’s referential claims rested on a suspect premise: that detailism was equivalent in some profound way to truthfulness. Not only was this bad faith epistemologically, Lewes thought, it was threatening the wider culture:

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<sup>93</sup> Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians*, p. 20.

<sup>94</sup> Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians*, p. 38; p. 233.

<sup>95</sup> “I once intended the illustrations to these volumes to be more numerous and elaborate, but the art of photography now enables my reader to obtain as many memoranda of the facts of nature as he needs.” Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 9.

<sup>96</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VI, pp. 81-82.



There is, at the present day, a fashion in Literature, and in Art generally, which is very deplorable... The fashion is that of coat-and-waistcoat realism, a creeping timidity of invention, moving almost exclusively amid scenes of drawing-room existence, with all the reticences and pettinesses of drawing-room conventions. Artists have become photographers, and have turned the camera upon the vulgarities of life, instead of representing the more impassioned movements of life... [Yet] the artists have *not* painted what they have seen, but have been false and conventional in their pretended realism.<sup>97</sup>

Artists have become photographers: the judgment is scathing, not celebratory. He uses the word with a contempt that indicates how resistant empiricism could be to this seemingly unmediated form of knowledge. Interesting to note is the echo of Ruskin in Lewes's final phrase "pretended realism"—the more these substandard novelists and artists approach the ideal of photorealism in their writing or on their canvases, the more false they become. Photography, Lewes agrees, has encouraged a standard in representational discourse which, when adhered to, produces a false kind of knowledge precisely at the point that it imagines itself to mirror objective reality faithfully.

Like a photographer, Canaletto, who represents for Ruskin a particular nadir in the modern history of Western art, aspires to a copyism that tries to exert a kind of mechanical mastery over the meaning of the world it represents. By seeming to narrow the interpretative space in visual representation to almost the zero degree, his aesthetic expresses an empowering fantasy of perfectly unified vision and total knowledge. This epitomises the representational logic of imitation. Ruskin, consequently, advances a two-pronged critique of Canaletto. First of all, he sees *trompe l'oeil* as an ultimately self-regarding aesthetic, vainly pursuing a type of visual deception whose only goal is gaining the spectator's admiration. In the imitative work, the artist's own hand, not the object itself, ultimately wins our

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<sup>97</sup> G. H. Lewes, *Principles of Success in Literature*, pp. 26-7.

attention. And so imitation is closely bound up with egotistical pleasure, and specifically with the vanity that comes of having mastered the representable world; as Caroline Levine argues, “imitative art is dangerous because it teaches us to enjoy our own authority.”<sup>98</sup> Like much contemporary criticism today, Ruskin intuitively senses an important connection here between mimesis and power. In contrast, realism, as he defines it, should attempt to overcome the vanity of the ego and the self-aggrandisement latent within it. That requires conceding mastery over the visual world, as he routinely reminds us: “It has been stated, over and over again, that it is not *possible* to draw the whole of nature, as in a mirror.”<sup>99</sup> The incompleteness of visual representation should even be seen as a necessary aspect of its capacity for expressing truth: “Painting has its peculiar virtues, not only consistent with, but even resulting from, its shortcomings and weaknesses.”<sup>100</sup>

The second aspect of Ruskin’s critique has to do with the way Canaletto’s work simultaneously expresses an impoverishment of subjectivity. The “power of deceptive imitation,” Ruskin argues, “requires nothing more for its attainment than a true eye, a steady hand, and moderate industry—qualities which in no degree separate the imitative artist from a watchmaker, pin-maker, or any other neat-handed artificer.”<sup>101</sup> In Canaletto’s painting there is a dull mechanical quality deriving precisely from its elimination of human feeling, which its pretended realism necessitates. He manages to render Venice, for example, as an almost alien, inhuman, dehistoricised landscape; the buildings of San Marco seem to lack their “ancestral dignity,” and there is “no texture of stone nor character of age” in the realisation of architectural detail, which he achieves with “a violent, black, sharp, ruled penmanlike line.”<sup>102</sup> More artisan than artist, his concern for clarity and intelligibility results in a peculiar numbness or inauthenticity. The laborious detail

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<sup>98</sup> Levine, “Seductive Reflexivity,” p. 371.

<sup>99</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VI, p. 45.

<sup>100</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 176.

<sup>101</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 103.

<sup>102</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 215.

and studious rendering bind his painting to what Ruskin calls the “shackles and fetters of mere external fact.”<sup>103</sup> His is a Venice leached of all traces of human response and sensory knowledge, an implicitly spectatorless panorama of fact. In its effort to stabilise reality, his painting empties the representational space of its relation to subjectivity.<sup>104</sup> As such, Canaletto successfully executes the imitation at the expense of truth.

Realism, then, for Ruskin, means actively opposing the tendency in art for mindless imitation. It must openly retain its distance from the real, and finally it must reincorporate the dangerous subjectivity that Ruskin declares should annihilate itself before the object. Just as Ruskin himself will not be suppressed in the narrative of *Modern Painters*, despite his insistence that the writer should be invisible, so in his aesthetic theory the empiricist concept of subjectivity does not disappear or even recede. On the contrary, the instability of identity is one of its pervasive concerns; and it is precisely a problem with painters like Canaletto that their work banishes the notion of reality as felt experience. A passage from volume three neatly suggests the divide between, say, a Turner and a Canaletto:

Great art is produced by men who feel acutely and nobly; and it is in some sort an expression of this personal feeling. We can easily conceive that there may be a sufficiently marked distinction between such art, and that which is produced by men who do not feel at all, but who reproduce, though ever so accurately, yet coldly, like human mirrors, the scenes which pass before their eyes.”<sup>105</sup>

Where Canaletto is a cold human mirror, Turner incorporates subjectivity into the form and texture of his work. The contingency of his being in the world supplies the ground from which realism can articulate its epistemological vision. For realism, as

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<sup>103</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, IV, p. 278.

<sup>104</sup> Ruskin takes this de-subjectivisation to be a symptom of a wider cultural decline: “[His] miserable, virtueless, heartless mechanism, accepted as the representation of such various glory, is, both in its existence and acceptance, among the most striking signs of the lost sensation and deadened intellect of the nation at that time.” Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 214.

<sup>105</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 32.

Ruskin sees it, implies a situated perspective. While not an end of realistic art in itself, psychological point of view marks at least a condition of its possibility. "Any topographical delineation of the facts," he argues, "must be wholly incapable of arousing in the mind of the beholder those sensations which would be caused by the facts themselves, seen in their natural relations to others." And herein lies the influence of empiricism in Ruskin's theory of realism: our only real facts are those embedded inside dynamic and relative processes of consciousness. In other words, it is the mental *sensation* of facts (we might validly say feelings instead) that realism has the burden of representing, not a transparent world independent of our finite mutable selves. Where the mere copyist seeks self-annihilation, the realist communicates "the far higher and deeper truth of mental vision."<sup>106</sup>

In common with other mid-Victorian empiricists, Ruskin therefore enlists the observer as a figure through whom knowledge must pass. Indeed, the thrust of *Modern Painters* is often heavily psychologistic, both in vocabulary and vision. At times, for instance, Turner's greatness appears to rest more on his mental stature than it does on the intrinsic merit of his finished canvases: "Turner's mind is not more, in my estimation, distinguished above others by its demonstrably arranging and ruling faculties, than by its demonstrably retentive and submissive faculties; and the longer I investigate it, the more this tenderness of perception and grasp of memory seem to me the root of its greatness."<sup>107</sup> Form and composition, he thinks, have value partly because through them a historical psychological identity might be retraced, for they can reveal "the great human spirit through which [reality] is manifested to us."<sup>108</sup> Rather than amounting to some crude biographism, this argument draws much more importantly on empiricism's guiding assumption that knowledge establishes itself within emergent psychological structures, and that reality can only ever be encountered under relational description.

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<sup>106</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VI, pp. 35-36.

<sup>107</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VI, p. 44.

<sup>108</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 187.

Two short passages from *Modern Painters*, in particular, help to convey this empiricist psychological and epistemological commitment. One appears in the first volume, again in connection with 'Ideas of Truth':

But the highest art, being based on sensations of peculiar minds, sensations occurring to *them* only at particular times... and being expressive of thoughts which could only rise out of a mass of the most extended knowledge, and of dispositions modified in a thousand ways by peculiarity of intellect, can only be met and understood by persons having some sort of sympathy with the high and solitary minds which produced it...<sup>109</sup>

The second, from volume two, arises in a discussion of the imagination:

These sources of beauty [in nature], however, are not presented by any very great work of art in a form of pure transcript. They invariably receive the reflection of the mind under whose influence they have passed, and are modified or coloured by its image. This modification is the Work of Imagination... [I]t is very necessary... [to] distinguish its sane, healthy, and profitable operation, from that which is erratic, diseased, and dangerous.<sup>110</sup>

The theme raised in the first passage—the particularity of the sensuous intellect—becomes, in the second, part of a strong argument against mimesis. Ruskin's point in both is that perception, thought, imagination and representation all share the same contingency, in turn ideally translated into an aesthetic property of the artwork itself. The singularity of the creative mind thus imprints itself indelibly in the singular form of the work; imaginative activity, Ruskin says, is an indispensable dimension of this process. While this appears to reiterate a romantic valorisation of creativity and uniqueness, Ruskin's position actually strives to distance itself from late eighteenth-century definitions of the imagination and also from expressive models of authorship. At times, indeed, Ruskin treats quite contemptuously the myth of unworldly genius which forms such an influential part of romanticism's

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<sup>109</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 135-36.

<sup>110</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, IV, p. 223.

cultural legacy.<sup>111</sup> Instead, his view of the role played by imagination in our perception of objects connects him to mid-century psychologists like Lewes and Alexander Bain, who saw the imagination not as a quasi-transcendent mental faculty but as a kind of inferential psychological process. Lewes, for example, who argued that it was common both to philosophy and art, grounded the operation of the imagination firmly in experience: "It should, however, be borne in mind that Imagination can only recall what Sense has previously impressed. No man imagines any detail of which he has not previously had direct or indirect experience."<sup>112</sup> Bain felt that imagination was a more accurate word for perception, because, he said, its constructive agency assists in transforming the data of sense-experience into recognisable mental images: "Such transformation of a sum-total of association into a self-existent unit, is a frequent mental illusion. This supposed object is an entity, not [only] of sense, but of imagination and belief, to which we erroneously apply this word perception."<sup>113</sup> And in Ruskin, likewise, imagination has primarily an epistemological, not aesthetic, kind of significance: "We call the power 'Imagination,' because it imagines or conceives *the truth*."<sup>114</sup> That is to say, it takes us towards the world of experience rather than exiling us mystically from it. A mind that was wholly unimaginative would be, for Ruskin, figuratively blind.<sup>115</sup>

Like these other empiricists, associationism importantly informs Ruskin's understanding of the mind. As Patricia Ball rightly says, "Ruskin exists on a plane of emotionally-led association," which is inseparable from his language of fact.<sup>116</sup> The imagination in *Modern Painters* is tied especially closely to the principles and workings of mental association, for it facilitates the apprehension of fact as such.

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<sup>111</sup> For example, from volume three of *Modern Painters*: "Let a man have shaggy hair, dark eyes, a rolling voice, plenty of animal energy, and a facility of rhyming or sentencing, and—improvisatore or sentimentalist—we call him 'inspired' willingly enough..." Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 190.

<sup>112</sup> Lewes, *Principles of Success in Literature*, p. 49; pp. 55-56.

<sup>113</sup> Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*. (1859) London: Longmans, Green and Co., 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1865, n. p. 585.

<sup>114</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, V, p. 178.

<sup>115</sup> "I believe it will be found that the entirely unimaginative mind *sees* nothing of the object it has to dwell upon or describe, and is therefore utterly unable, as it is blind to itself, to set anything before the eyes of the reader." Ruskin, *Works*, IV, p. 253.

<sup>116</sup> Ball, *The Science of Aspects*, p. 72.



What he calls the 'associative imagination' is, for Ruskin, "the most elevated power of mind," and by it "images apposite or resemblant, or of whatever kind wanted, are called up quickly and in multitudes."<sup>117</sup> As this implies, associationism supports a multiple, relational model of psychology:

[A] powerfully imaginative mind seizes and combines at the same instant, not only two, but all the important ideas of its poem or picture; and while it works with any one of them, it is at the same instant working with and modifying all in their relations to it, never losing sight of their bearings on each other; as the motion of the snake's body goes through all parts at once, and its volition acts at the same instant in coils that go contrary ways.<sup>118</sup>

Likened in a wonderfully suggestive metaphor to a coiled snake, the mind in the instant of composition grasps a configuration of relations between multiple ideas; and association, like the body of the snake, holds together these different elements in an unlikely unity or tension. Every part interacts relationally with the whole. By means of a process that Ruskin compares to chemistry, the associative imagination selects otherwise dissonant ideas "which together shall be right, and of whose unity, therefore, the idea must be formed at the instant they are seized."<sup>119</sup> Striking here is the way that Ruskin talks in an equivalent way about mind and picture: both are described using a formalist language of unity, balance and harmony, as though merging into one another. Ideas, it seems, are primarily mental qualities, yet also elements in a painting. The ambiguity suggests that the associational moment extends into the two-dimensional medium of the representation. Ruskin's theory thus encourages the view that the flat painted surface of a canvas constitutes the formal occasion of an ideational structure, realising in visual space a specific set of psychological relations. Indeed, in Turner's pictures we "always find the associative

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<sup>117</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, IV, p. 232.

<sup>118</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, IV, pp. 235-36.

<sup>119</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, IV, p. 234.

imagination developed in the most profuse and marvellous modes."<sup>120</sup> Realism, on this view, entails translating into aesthetic form the kinds of relational shifts and connections postulated by associationist psychology.

As we shall see in the next chapter, the conditions of perception for Ruskin are always associational, just as they are for Lewes, Bain, Herbert Spencer and George Eliot. Their empiricism entails recognising how we have to encounter the world through our selves—through shifting, unstable, historicised identities. And Ruskin also shows a sensitive grasp of how consciousness shapes the 'reality' that we see and represent under the rubric of realism. The genuine realist, he says, such as Turner, understands these same conditions. For past associations live on in the objects that presently we perceive, almost unconsciously. If our eye happens to fall on the branch of a tree during conversation with a friend, a trace of that pleasurable experience will be summoned thereafter when we experience trees in future. The original occasion may itself be long forgotten, yet its effect will be "a pleasure so slight, a trace of feeling so delicate, as to leave us utterly unconscious of its peculiar power; but undestroyable by any reasoning, a part, thenceforward, of our constitution, destroyable only by the same arbitrary process of association by which it was created." And reason has barely any influence over this intrusion of memory into perception. We cannot block out associational activity from our judgments using rational will power: "there is probably no one opinion which is formed by any of us, in matters of taste, which is not in some degree influenced by unconscious association of this kind."<sup>121</sup> For Ruskin, it becomes the task of the realist to grasp these pervasive tracings of desire and memory in the mind's cognition of reality.

In fact, the historical re-evaluation of aesthetic value that *Modern Painters* sets out before the reader hinges on this understanding. If Turner comes closer than any other artist to fulfilling the goals of realism, it is because his work seems to grasp the limitations entailed in knowing. He presents us with a reality

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<sup>120</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, IV, p. 246.

<sup>121</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, IV, p. 73.

comprised of blurred borders, imprecise natural contours, partially realised details of landscape, swirling suggestions of earth and sky, and hazy mists of light and colour. The world, to Turner's eye, is never fully knowable or rationally intelligible. Flux and indeterminacy are its predominant motifs. Never pretending to a perfect or even adequate grip on the physical world, he dramatises the incompleteness and uncertainty that attend the point of view of his implied spectator, not the mastery exerted by the act of observation. He depicts a reality shaped by excitements of the feelings and promptings of desire, constantly evoking the world not as it might be in itself (a speculative, bracketed question for empiricism) but as it exists when our perspectives, too, can be admitted into the definition of reality. His paintings thus gain their aesthetic power from enforcing what we could call a visual scepticism: a rejection of clarity and distinctness founded on the understanding of the limits and ignorance of all potential vantage points. To Ruskin, this was necessary: "As all subjects have a mystery in *them*, so all drawing must have a mystery in *it*."<sup>122</sup>

Behind Turner's primacy in *Modern Painters*, then, stands epistemology. As Charles Reeve points out, "Ruskin wants to argue that nothing can be known with absolute certainty"—and Turner comes to figure exactly this in his narrative.<sup>123</sup> The scepticism of Ruskin's position may not quite approach the radicalism of Roland Barthes's claim that realism "has no responsibility vis-à-vis the real," but certainly it denies the referential accessibility of a 'real' unshaped by associational desire and conventional codes of description.<sup>124</sup> (An intriguing aspect of Ruskin's rejection of huge swathes of Western painting is an argument he makes to the effect that the general cultural imagination typically sees nature through pictorial conventions inherited from traditionally great painters, not as it appears; in other words, people unconsciously see reality as if it were artifice, for the history of art has (falsely)

<sup>122</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VI, p. 83.

<sup>123</sup> Charles Reeve, "Godly Untruth," *Assemblage* 32, 1997, p. 52.

<sup>124</sup> "The first [proposition] is that the discourse has no responsibility vis-à-vis the real: in the most realistic novel, the referent has no 'reality': suffice it to imagine the disorder the most orderly narrative would create were its descriptions taken at face value, converted into operative programs and simply *executed*." Roland Barthes, *S/Z*. trans. Richard Miller, London: Blackwell, 1990, pp. 80-81.

conditioned their own perception of the world around them: "if we could examine the conception formed in the minds of most educated persons when we talk of clouds, it would frequently be found composed of fragments of blue and white reminiscences of the old masters."<sup>125</sup>) Ruskin neither believes nor expects art to be capable of aligning itself transparently with objective reality. *Modern Painters*, in its quest to establish the 'truth' of Turner, forms an extended and unsystematic refutation of the possibility of such an absolute relation. As Reeve, again, notes: "Ruskin's truth is that there is no truth—or, at least, not one that we can hope to understand or represent."<sup>126</sup> This apparent crisis of knowledge inscribes itself in a realist like Turner, in whom we sense the sheer unsurveyable excess of the visual field and the fragility of the subjective ground where the perceptual act of knowing has to take place. The empiricism of *Modern Painters* therefore leads Ruskin increasingly to embrace a form of scepticism, which as it strives towards truth also forces the narrative to recognise the inconceivability of full knowledge:

Knowledge is good, and light is good, yet man perished in seeking knowledge, and moths perish in seeking light; and if we, who are crushed before the moth, will not accept such mystery as is needful for us, we shall perish in like manner. But accepted in humbleness, it instantly becomes an element of pleasure; and I think that every rightly constituted mind ought to rejoice, not so much in knowing anything clearly, as in feeling that there is infinitely more which it cannot know.<sup>127</sup>

In the end, *Modern Painters* absorbs empiricism at a methodological level, and thereby manages over its twisting course to resemble what Lewes, for example, insisted a proper history of art and criticism should look like: "To understand Nature, we must observe her manifestations, and trace out the laws of the co-existence and succession of phenomena. And in the same way, to understand Art,

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<sup>125</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 345-46.

<sup>126</sup> Charles Reeve, "Godly Untruth," p. 52.

<sup>127</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VI, p. 90.

we must patiently examine the works of art; and from a large observation of successful efforts, deduce general conclusions respecting the laws upon which success depends.”<sup>128</sup> This much, arguably, Ruskin achieves. But that achievement depends on an ambivalent, even paradoxical, view of subjectivity that is also highly characteristic of mid-Victorian empiricist writing. According to it, the realist must submit to the external object of knowledge in an effort of self-denial which actually intensifies the relationship between subjectivity and representation. As Ruskin puts it: “The refusal or reserve of a mighty painter cannot be imitated; it is only by reaching the same intellectual strength that you will be able to give an equal dignity to your self-denial.”<sup>129</sup> Realism aims, ultimately, not for transparency, but for an aesthetic reproduction of the relational conditions that allow us to conceive of the idea of ‘reality’, which rests in turn on the continued evidence of a conscious mind within the represented world. Above all, realism as Ruskin sees it implies a grasp of how perspective makes perception possible. And the scepticism built into his theory intersects with a wider scepticism in mid-Victorian culture surrounding the question of perception and the powers of the eye, which it is the aim of the next chapter to elucidate.

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<sup>128</sup> G. H. Lewes, “Shakespeare’s Critics: English and Foreign,” *Edinburgh Review* XC, 1849, p. 68.

<sup>129</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VII, p. 235.

## Chapter Three

### The Eye (In)Exact:

#### G. H. Lewes and the Problems of Perception

Among the many epigraphs from philosophers, scientists and writers spread richly throughout G. H. Lewes's *Problems of Life and Mind* (1874-9) there appears in the third volume a brief excerpt from George Eliot's long dramatic poem "The Spanish Gypsy" (1868):

Our nimble souls  
Can spin an insubstantial universe  
Suiting our mood, and call it possible,  
Sooner than see one grain with eye exact,  
And give strict record of it.<sup>1</sup>

The lines from Eliot's poem appear to defend a straightforward anti-Platonism: man's metaphysical temperament, they insist, tends to convince him of his grand cosmic or religious schemes while causing him to overlook the reality observable in modest physical phenomena. Human nature, egotistical as it is, wrongly prefers whimsical speculation to patient observation, the ideal to the real. It seems on the face of it a fittingly realist creed, and one that Eliot can be found espousing in her 1855 essay on the German philosopher Otto Friedrich Gruppe, where she argues that philosophy "must renounce metaphysics: it must renounce the ambitious attempt to form a theory of the universe, to know things in their causes and first

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<sup>1</sup> G. H. Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, *The Physical Basis of Mind*. London: Trübner and Co., 1877, p. 137.



principles.”<sup>2</sup> Metaphysical theorising, she says, “is an attempt to poise the universe on one’s head, and no wonder if dizziness and delusion are the consequence.”<sup>3</sup> Unlike this early essay, however, the passage from “The Spanish Gypsy” happens to frame the opposition of fact to speculation in noticeably psychological terms. In doing so, it serves to undermine the certainty of the materialism it advocates. For while its effect is carried by a vertiginous shift in physical scale, turning sharply from the vastness of an “insubstantial universe” to the minute proportions of a single particle, its central concern is not so much the nature of reality as the contradictions of human psychology. It is only because the mind can understand itself in such different ways, as rootlessly immaterial (“our nimble souls”) and as a biologically housed subject, that this spectacular spatial contrast becomes possible. That is, the emphasis falls on the act of seeing rather than what is seen. Like so much of Eliot’s fiction, this passage refers to the psychology of the human eye, and to the inevitable colouring of perception by the subjectivity of the viewer (we see by “suited our mood”). The act of visualising an outward object, however large or small, depends upon the conditions supplied by our variable individual psychology and the mind’s instantaneous inferential activity. Even the relatively simple act of perception that the poem privileges—a seemingly transparent and natural use of the “eye exact”—depends initially on choosing to adopt this specific perceptual attitude towards the world. For that reason, there lurks in these lines an anxiety that the exactness of the eye may in fact be fallible, if not indeed a fiction, and that even a “strict record” of the real can barely repress the play of desire, feeling and association by which the eye is prompted.

To find in these lines an ironic unsettling of the very distinction they make between imagining the world and truly seeing it, is not to indulge in a reckless overreading. There are good reasons for doubting that Eliot or Lewes, or any of the

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<sup>2</sup> George Eliot, “The Future of German Philosophy” (1855) *Selected Critical Writings*. ed. Rosemary Ashton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 137

<sup>3</sup> Eliot, “The Future of German Philosophy”, p. 135.

other writers under consideration here, gave serious credence to the notion that the human eye was capable of accessing the physical world transparently in this way, or of reading the world so unproblematically. By the late 1860s, when Eliot is writing, Victorian technological advances had increased the power and application of the microscope considerably, with the important effect of demonstrating the dramatic limitations of ordinary sight, so that it would have been unthinkable to analyse matter such as a “grain” without auxiliary magnifying devices.<sup>4</sup> The narrative voice in Eliot’s poem, who places great faith in the penetration of unaided sight, clearly belongs to an earlier, perhaps pre-microscopic generation, rather than to mid-Victorian scientific culture. The intentional anachronism ought to be understood as Eliot quietly poking fun at stubbornly common sense views of perception and spectatorship, as well as at the concomitant notion of science as pure transcription, summed up in Newton’s *hypotheses non fingo*.<sup>5</sup> Even with the aid of microscopes, by the mid-century it was not held that a literal or final representation of particles of matter was possible; ‘simple’ matter was just as much a subject for hypotheses and conjecture as the metaphysician’s spinning of universes. Thus Alexander Bain writes in 1870: “All assertions as to the ultimate structure of the particles of matter are, and ever must be, hypothetical. Yet we must not discard them because they cannot be proved; the proper criterion for judging of their value is their aptness to represent the phenomena.”<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the psychological theories of perception in Lewes’s work (to which Eliot’s lines are appended as an epigraph), and also those developed by Bain, Ruskin and Herbert Spencer, articulate just this kind of visual problem, recognising how the limitations and complexities of seeing come into play at even the simplest levels of experience. These writers call into question, in other words, the eye exact.

<sup>4</sup> For a history of this piece of scientific apparatus see, for example, Bradbury Saville, *The Evolution of the Microscope*. London: Pergamon Press, 1967.

<sup>5</sup> For a wide ranging discussion of nineteenth century attitudes to sight, visual technologies and the physiology of looking, and their implications across art, literature and science, see Kate Flint, *The Victorians and The Visual Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Bain, *Logic*. (2 vols) London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1873, II, p. 132.

They deny the clarity of the gaze, and describe the routine unreliability of the sensory foundations of sight; they open up the psychological gap into which memory and association insert contingent mental activity and shape what the viewer sees; and they show how shades of feeling frequently enter into perception in infinitesimal ordinary ways. Above all, their empiricist accounts of perception stress the uncertainties latent in the mediating apparatuses of seeing. Such issues were central to empiricism, which had always presupposed a close relationship between perception and knowledge. In fact, it would be fair to say that its reputation centres on the issue. A key feature of critiques of empiricism, for example, especially those informed by feminist theory, has been its supposed valorisation in coolly philosophical terms of a controlling, empowering, objectifying gaze. A closer examination of the arguments of a mid-Victorian writer like Lewes, however, will establish that anxieties over irrationalities of the eye, the limits of perception, and threat of visual incoherence all multiplied the epistemological doubt at the heart of the enterprise in the nineteenth century.

Just as theories of sight were central to nineteenth-century psychological theory, so the language of looking is central to realist fiction. However, a generation of critical opinion has argued that Victorian realism refuses to interrogate the dynamics of the gaze, either theoretically or politically, as a consequence of its silent complicity in a bourgeois ideology which reproduces the world as readily intelligible. The seamless continuity between the omniscient consciousness of the narrator and the narrated fictional life, it is said, encodes a common-sense notion of spectatorship which assumes objects to be directly knowable and therefore appropriable—a fact reinforced for the reader by the obvious intelligibility of the text itself.<sup>7</sup> Yet in the hands of George Eliot the language of looking encodes, not the neutrality the gaze or the simple availability of a given ‘natural’ order of things, but

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Colin McCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*. London: Macmillan, 1978; Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*. London: Methuen, 1980; Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1988; Alison Lee, *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1990.

rather the habitual problems of perception and human interpretation. Take the opening of "The Sad Fortunes of Amos Barton," for example, the first of Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857) and often considered typical of her early naïve realism:

Shepperton Church was a very different-looking building five-and-twenty years ago. To be sure, its substantial stone tower looks at you through its intelligent eye, the clock, with the friendly expression of former days; but in everything else what changes! Now there is a wide span of slated roof flanking the old steeple; the windows are tall and symmetrical; the outer are resplendent with oak-graining, the inner doors reverentially noiseless with a garment of red-baize; and the walls, you are convinced, no lichen will ever again effect a settlement on – they are smooth and innutrient as the summit of the Rev. Amos Barton's head, after ten years of baldness and supererogatory soap. Pass through the baize doors and you will see the nave filled with well-shaped benches, understood to be free seats; while in certain eligible corners, less directly under the fire of the clergyman's eye, there are pews reserved for the Shepperton gentility. Ample galleries are supported on iron pillars, and in one of them stands the crowning glory, the very clasp or aigrette of Shepperton church-adornment – namely, an organ, not very much out of repair, on which a collector of small rents, differentiated by the force of circumstances into an organist, will accompany the alacrity of your departure after the blessing, by a sacred minuet or an easy 'Gloria'.

Immense improvement! says the well-regulated mind... Mine, I fear, is not a well-regulated mind.<sup>8</sup>

There are several points worth noting in this highly wrought proem. Immediately striking is the pervasive rhetoric of seeing. With a curious urgency, the narrator's first remark focuses on the variations in appearance of which the church is capable (it has been "a very different-looking building" in the past), a gesture which envisages possible perspectives on the object other than our present one, and which also divides the church's identity from itself by dispersing its reality across

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<sup>8</sup> George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life*. (1857) ed. Jennifer Gribble. London: Penguin, 1998, p. 7.

time. The invoking of multiple vantage points is then carried further by the suggestion that the spectator might become, by a reversal of the gaze, the object of the church's own "intelligent eye". Again, the effect is to conjure multiple lines of vision which traverse the scene and one another. But these overlapping gazes are far from being ideologically neutral. The imposing presence here of the "substantial stone tower", whose literal uprightness hints at the moral authority of the institution it represents, looks "at you" in a manner suggesting the surveillance function performed by the church as a socially regulatory body ('church' now a synecdoche for the larger religious organisation, not merely a localised building). As the passage continues, references to the organs of sight and to spaces of spectatorship abound: there is "the fire of the clergyman's eye", which again locates looking within an explicit discourse of power, while also introducing another viewing subjectivity into this already crowded scene; there are the "ample galleries" of the church's interior, a detail reminding us that the concept of sight is written into the architectural design of this building; and there is the idiosyncratic narrator who escorts us inside it, whose invitations to examine the church's notable features ("you will see the nave filled with well-shaped benches") culminate in a final visual spectacle: the "crowning glory" of Shepperton's restored church organ.

Finally, this last element of the scene offers its own kind of ironic disruption to the plane of representation. Its underlying suggestions of decay and neglect (the organ repairs, the second-rate organist, the visitors who leave with "alacrity") open an ironic gap between the apparent and implied meanings of the narrator's language, between his proud ambassadorial tone and our ambiguous impressions of the scene. The disjunction produces a particularising effect, splitting experience into different points of view, and anchoring the disembodied voice of the narrator within the limits of personality. The irony isolates the reader in an interpretive position that lacks easy identifications with other perspectives, including the narrator's own, while showing the experience of such difference to constitute any

observer's relation to the real. Neither reader nor narrator has the function of grounding or stabilising the mass of viewpoints that the passage evokes, only rather exists within it. For this reason the sequence concludes with the threatened dissolution of its organising voice: determining some final value can belong to an imaginary "well-regulated mind" but not to the figure of the narrator, who renounces his own reliability in the act of idealising such a viewer.

If the fascination with the eye in the opening sequence of "Amos Barton" has an epistemological implication, it is that perspective facilitates and duly limits the scope of perception. All of the eyes that fall on the scene, whether realised or implied, experience and produce its reality differently. There is no guarantee that the rational power of sight can stabilise the objects it represents, or cut through the entangled perceptions of others to a correct account of the way reality is ordered. The effect is to render the signified of 'Shepperton Church' radically unfinalisable: as perspectives on it multiply, so too does the number of potential interpretations. Reality resists being smoothly assimilated into the mind of a privileged observer. In short, Eliot's method foregrounds sight precisely to call its rational clarity into question. This, as we will see, is also a central feature of Lewes's work.

## Visions and Revisions

Lewes's views on perception, like his views on most subjects, span the worlds of science and literature. To which of the two Victorian 'cultures', in general, he truly belonged is hard to say.<sup>9</sup> A critic, novelist and playwright as well as a scientist and historian of philosophy, Lewes was brilliant at crossing disciplines and envisaging intellectual activity from varied standpoints.<sup>10</sup> His versatile body of work itself embodies a kind of restless shifting between intellectual angles and perspectives, a

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<sup>9</sup> Rick Rylance suggests that his apparent influence in the world of the latter (not least his association with George Eliot) earned him a poor reputation in the former, and consequently he was not taken seriously by scientific culture either in his own lifetime or thereafter. See Rick Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture 1850-1880*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 252-54.

<sup>10</sup> The finest biography to fully explore Lewes's life beyond its ties with George Eliot is Rosemary Ashton, *G. H. Lewes: A Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.



switching between modes of apprehension that serves to embrace heterogeneity as an article of epistemological faith. It also produces a rich and digressive textual surface. In Lewes, one never feels very far away from an experimental or risky moment, a sudden unexpected narrative turn or fragmentary aside, or perhaps a collision of deductive science with particular human interests. His account of the bloodstream, for example, in *The Physiology of Common Life* (1859), combines consciously varied verbal textures, from history, myth, melodrama and biology; and just as the blood, as a substance, turns out to contain multiple elements, so his narrative is not one either, as we will see later in the chapter.<sup>11</sup> Rather like Ruskin, Lewes's work readily concedes the contingency of its own textual situation. What he labels the problems of life and mind cannot be exhausted by the norms of scientific description alone but need to be seen from multiple, relative positions.

This does not mean that Lewes's writing merely dances lightfootedly around its subject, or lacks seriousness. But it does mean that interpretations of his work and philosophical leanings differ considerably. It was noted in the first chapter that the turn towards idealism in British intellectual life was well underway by the 1870s, and that Lewes (along with Eliot, Carlyle and earlier Coleridge) was one of the key importers of German thought into Victorian culture. Against this backdrop, many assume that Lewes ought therefore to be read as an idealist, most notably the critic Hock Guan Tjoa.<sup>12</sup> Others, however, such as Peter Allan Dale, take an almost opposite view of Lewes, seeing him as yet another exponent of a sturdy nineteenth-century tradition of post-Romantic scientific realism. Lewes, Dale argues, clung like fellow scientists to an Aristotelian idea of mimesis, and believed that realism in art and science "could achieve an absolute, nonsymbolic relation with the real."<sup>13</sup> A glance at these contrasting views reveals that they conform to an all too familiar

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<sup>11</sup> G. H. Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life*. (2 vols) Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1859-60, I, pp. 239-336.

<sup>12</sup> Hock Guan Tjoa, *George Henry Lewes: A Victorian Mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Allan Dale, *In Pursuit of a Scientific Culture: Science, Art and Society in the Victorian Age*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, p. 74 (see in general pp. 59-84).

dichotomy of idealism/empiricism, whose poles continue to organise our view of mid-nineteenth century culture. Needless to say, this binary reduces empiricism to the status of a dogmatic, fact-gathering naturalism. As will be argued here, this state of affairs fails to do justice to Lewes's versatility as thinker and writer, or to empiricism as a cultural formation in the period.

Before considering the detail of Lewes's arguments regarding the problems of perception, it will be worth placing him in a context of growing uncertainty surrounding the powers of the eye. It would be a mistake to proceed as though Lewes developed a uniquely sceptical view of perception, and in fact by the time of George Eliot's death in 1880 a significant interest had emerged in general in the irrational aspects of human psychology, to which the topic of perception was in places linked. The fascination with the irrational as such encompassed not only the bodily processes beyond voluntary rational control (such as the beating of the heart or digestion, which become known as 'unconscious' processes) but also breaks in the mind's rational self-possession, as shown by such phenomena as delusions, dreams and hallucinations. Though a long way from Freud's privileging of the unconscious as a psychodynamic law, empiricism was disposed to identifying such limitations because of its standard recourse to environmental and emotional constraints on the individual will; indeed, the empiricist narrative of the ego's journey into experience was not necessarily always one of heroic self-mastery in the period's psychological theory. James Sully, for example, one of Lewes's literary executors and a successful psychologist himself, devoted much of his research to these kinds of twilight mental experience. In a work entitled *Illusions* (1881), Sully begins from the outset by recognising the inconsistencies of the eye:

Hardly anybody is always consistently sober and rational in his perceptions and beliefs. A momentary fatigue of the nerves, a little mental excitement, a relaxation of the effort of attention by which we continually take our bearings with respect to the real world about us, will produce just the same kind of

confusion of reality and phantasm which we observe in the insane... Our luminous circle of rational perception is surrounded by the misty penumbra of illusion.<sup>14</sup>

Sully's phrasing sounds surprisingly modernist, reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's later evocations of the enigma of consciousness. Indeed, like her now familiar description of "an ordinary mind on an ordinary day," his psychological portrait emphasises disorderliness through specific metaphors of indeterminacy—shadows, mirages, mists—which like Woolf's mental image of a "semi-transparent envelope" convey qualities of obscurity and formlessness. In capturing what she would call "this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit" of mental experience, which forever inhabits subjectivity, Sully does more than suggest that the mind is capable of occasional errors caused by temporary mental dysfunction.<sup>15</sup> Rather more radically, his argument refuses to bracket off instances of delusion, fantasy and misrecognition as marginal forms of psychological activity. That is, it resituates instances of non-rational visual experience inside a normative account of perception, instead of pathologising them within a discourse of psychic or medical abnormality. What Woolf will later refer to as the "dark places of psychology" exist for Sully, too.<sup>16</sup> He likewise utilises metaphors presupposing a spatial model of consciousness, where the rational and non-rational are figured as overlapping and interpenetrative regions, instead of separate regimes clearly distinguishable in the course of ordinary thought. In this regard, Sully's repertoire of psychological metaphors, particularly his idea of an amorphous shadow enveloping the luminous or rational areas of consciousness, seems strikingly prescient with regard to the modernist turn in psychological and literary language.

However, as much as it looks forward to a later generation of theory, Sully's work on illusions is best considered as actively in dialogue with ideas and debates

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<sup>14</sup> James Sully, *Illusions: A Psychological Study*. London: C. Kegan Paul, 1881, pp. 2-3.

<sup>15</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," in *The Common Reader*. First Series (1925) London: Hogarth Press, 1968, p. 189.

<sup>16</sup> Woolf, "Modern Fiction," p. 192.

taking place much closer to him in time. Viewing passages like his as though they belonged to the spirit of a different era—as untimely anticipations of a uniquely modernist moment—only makes sense if we take the Victorian period and the early twentieth century to be opposable events in cultural history. To do so, however, would be to uncritically accept modernism’s own resistance to history, concealing its roots in nineteenth-century culture. Sully’s *Illusions*, as it happens, read in its mid-Victorian context, certainly does not feel like a text out of time. It extends views on perception found in earlier writing during the nineteenth century, notably, for example, in the work of Ruskin and Herbert Spencer. In his *Principles of Psychology* (1855), Spencer had already given attention to the irrational behaviours of the eye and the lapses in visual concentration described so vividly by Sully. A key theme running throughout Spencer’s long discussion of the visual faculty is that the mind frequently gives inaccurate reports of the things it sees, even (or especially) when faced with undemanding and trivial visual tasks. “The instances in which, from mental distraction, we go on searching for something we have in our hands, or overlook that which is directly under our eyes”, he says, serve as evidence of this pervasive unreliability.<sup>17</sup> Like Sully, who finds that “illusion thus has its roots in ordinary mental life,” Spencer sees the potential for error, blindness and misrepresentation forever inhabiting our visual experience of the world around us.<sup>18</sup> Ordinary perception turns out to be a layered, complex and fallible process.

He also shares Sully’s explanation of how illusion arises. When an object or scene is perceived, Sully insists, its corresponding mental impression (or sensation, to be technically correct) may “go unattended to” by the visual imagination, causing no proper perception to be created (“The sensation floats in the dim outer regions of consciousness as a vague feeling”).<sup>19</sup> It is from these encircling, unformed perceptions that illusions derive. Spencer makes almost the same point, drawing an

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<sup>17</sup> Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*. London: Williams and Northgate, 1855, pp. 185-6.

<sup>18</sup> Sully, *Illusions*, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Sully, *Illusions*, pp. 20-1.

identical distinction between sensation and perception: “the mere passive reception of the visual image or group of sensations produced by an object, does not constitute a perception of it. A perception of it can arise only when the group of sensations is consciously co-ordinated and their meaning understood.”<sup>20</sup> In the absence of adequate co-ordination and understanding, the possibility of defective vision arises. In other words, what feels like an instantaneous recognition of an object or person actually derives from silently inferential activity.

When Sully says with manifest understatement that “perception is not so simple a matter as it might at first seem to be,” he therefore encapsulates an idea already well established in empiricist thinking.<sup>21</sup> Ruskin, in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843), similarly argues that perception entails more than the mere physical proximity of eye and object: “The first great mistake that people make... is the supposition that they must *see* a thing if it be before their eyes.”<sup>22</sup> The act of seeing, so crucial to Ruskin’s theory of art and to the ethical urgency of his arguments, is—as we saw in the previous chapter—an indirect, inwardly-gesturing, multilayered activity bound strongly to a past narrative of subjective identity. The eye provides a constant source of sensation, he argues, whereas *seeing* indicates a cultivated and psychological practice involving the mind of the spectator:

[T]he eye during our waking hours, exercises constantly its function of seeing; it is the constant habit; we always, as far as the *bodily* organ is concerned, see something, and we always see in the same degree; so that the occurrence of sight, as such, to the eye, is only the continuance of its necessary state of action, and awakes not attention whatsoever, except by the particular nature and quality of the sight. And thus, unless the minds of men are particularly directed to the impressions of sight, objects pass perpetually before the eyes without conveying any impression to the brain at all.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, p. 186.

<sup>21</sup> Sully, *Illusions*, p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*. (39 vols) eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, London: George Allen, 1903-12, III, p. 141. pp. 141-43.

<sup>23</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, pp. 141-42.

Even with the utmost effort, however, and years of dedicated visual attention, the faculty of sight remains flawed, Ruskin insists. We do not see with absolute clarity, and rational control over the eye cannot ever wholly eliminate the possibility of visual error. Seeing wrongly, or only partially, is for Ruskin characteristic of our encounter with the world. In fact, his theory of sight in *Modern Painters* repeats the idea that in the field of vision, haziness and even regional blindness surround all clearly distinguished objects: “[when you] place an object as close to the eye as you like, there is always something in it which you *cannot* see...”<sup>24</sup> One reason for this has to do with the focusing mechanism of the eyeball and optical laws. If two objects stand before the viewer at different distances, the eye, like any kind of lens, is forced to adjust its focus in order to move between each object. The simultaneous visualisation of both, as equally distinct objects, thus cannot be achieved. Due to the “impossibility of the rays proceeding from both converging to the same focus,” Ruskin demonstrates, “the whole impression, either of one or the other, must necessarily be confused, indistinct, and inadequate.”<sup>25</sup>

In the context of aesthetic criticism, this means that paintings depicting the spatial world as if foreground and background were both equally distinct, such as a typical Canaletto, constitute untrue approximations of the visual act. The world is not flatly surveyable by the eye, as they would imply. The best paintings, especially those of Turner, respond to the world by conveying a necessary sense of its vast and incomprehensible excess, its tendency to overwhelm the spectator. His unfocused swirls of light and colour communicate, for Ruskin, the hazy effects of retinal adjustment and optical alignment as the imaginary eye strains for clarity in its perception of spatially distributed bodies. They represent the uncertainty and confusion inherent in the psychological processing of sensations into perceptions.

The narrator of *Ranthorpe* (1847), Lewes’s early novel about a young poet’s destiny in a sometimes indifferent world, has a tendency to echo some of Ruskin’s

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<sup>24</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 329.

<sup>25</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 320.



convictions. He notes, for example, midway through the story: "Only as much as the mind knows can the eye see; only so much as the mind perceives in any object, can it attempt to represent."<sup>26</sup> His idea suggests, like Lewes's later theory, that seeing is not only influenced or complicated by its relationship with the mind of the observer, but that the mind virtually defines its scope and possibility. A neutral instrument the eye almost certainly is not. Slightly earlier, the narrator recalls how the outer and inner aspects of experience fuse in the eye's activity, as instants of perception join with associational feeling: "I know not why it is that lovely scenes—or even a bit of sunshine of a spot of green—or a gush of a rivulet through a deserted lane, always curiously affect me. These things 'overcome me like a summer cloud'—stirring the depths of my soul; and yet so vague and shadowy the impressions, that they seem more like the broken memories of many dreams uniting into one, than any distinct reminiscence. Are other so affected?"<sup>27</sup> The narrator's position renders the last question implicitly redundant—his elevation in Lewes's novel above plot and character makes it likely that he knows the answer to it—and so it serves only to stress the private and subjective quality of perceptual experience. The moment might have come from Ruskin, or it could even plausibly mimic an instant from Turner himself; the internal response is shown to mingle inseparably with the represented world, mutating into broken, vague, uncertain forms and unfocused memories, and in this haziness the boundary dissolves between the eye's outward attention and its powerful enforcement of personality.<sup>28</sup>

A similar, if more profoundly destabilising moment occurs in one of George Eliot's most memorable passages in *Middlemarch*. Dorothea Brooke, enduring her disastrous honeymoon in Rome, finds that the city repels her gaze as she surveys its ancient topography and architectural splendour:

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<sup>26</sup> G. H. Lewes, *Ranthorpe* (1847) ed. Barbara Smalley, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1974, p. 186.

<sup>27</sup> Lewes, *Ranthorpe*, p. 179.

<sup>28</sup> In his discussion of unconscious association, Ruskin describes how past experience works its way into present perceptions as "a trace of feeling." See Ruskin, *Works*, III, p. 73.

Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present, where all that was living and warm-blooded seemed sunk in the deep degeneracy of a superstition divorced from reverence; the dimmer but yet eager Titanic life gazing and struggling on the walls and ceilings; the long vistas of white forms whose marble eyes seemed to hold the monotonous light of an alien world; all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness degradation, at first jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves upon her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion. Forms both pale and glowing took possession of her young sense, and fixed themselves in her memory even when she was not thinking of them, preparing strange associations which remained through her after-years. Our moods are apt to bring with them images which succeed each other like the magic-lantern pictures of a doze; and in certain states of dull forlornness Dorothea all her life continued to see the vastness of St Peter's, the huge bronze canopy, the excited intention in the attitudes and garments of the prophets and evangelists in the mozaics above, and the red drapery which was being hung for Christmas spreading itself everywhere like a disease of the retina.<sup>29</sup>

The narrative effect is dizzying and vertiginous. The passage seizes upon a moment when the act of looking confronts the terrifying oppressiveness of the world it tries to read. The objects constituting the visual field—a churning mass of buildings and bodies—refuse to be synthesised into a legible unity. In psychological terms, it suggests the over-stimulation of the visual sense, a hellish overloading from which Dorothea's mind cannot recover a stable perception. Instead, Rome as a spectacle remains inappropriable—defiantly other to the understanding, irreducibly alien, ghoulishly hallucinatory. Various devices point us towards this unreality: repeated evocations of scale, projections forward in time, references to the opaque and the spectral, suggestions of unruly and unknown energies. Again, the psychological register invites the dissolution of boundaries, undermining the directness of the

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<sup>29</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*. (1871-2) ed. Rosemary Ashton. London: Penguin: 1994, p. 194.

eye's relationship with the physical world. It licenses the potential transfer of properties across or between substances, blending consciousness with objects, the organic with the built, the living with the dead. All of this exists in an acute tension with the city of Rome itself, a place whose appeal for the nineteenth-century visitor lies in its special connection to the cerebral and the universal. As the narrator notes, it symbolises the "spiritual centre" of the world, its antiquarian grandiosity both evidence and emblem of centuries of continuous European cultural achievement.<sup>30</sup> Rome promises foundations in more than the architectural sense, signifying as it does cultural origins and order. Meaning ought to be stabilised here—Casaubon, we recall, pursues origins of a philological kind in the city, and assumes that it will hold the key to his grand synthetic project. Its perceived function is to guarantee coherence of one kind or another. For Dorothea, however, it becomes the agent of precisely the opposite: a radical decentring of meaning and agonising visual chaos.

In the last line, Eliot's narrator likens the vision to a retinal disease. This confirms that the scene registers a crisis of seeing. But the eye is not *actually* medically dysfunctional; like Sully, Eliot's representation of perception allows for, and normalises, its irrational habits. The significance of the simile hinges upon the weakness of the gaze, its bewilderment, its inescapable connection to inner feeling, and its capacity to turn in on itself—not whether it would be best for Dorothea to be dispatched to a sanatorium. This becomes clearer further down the passage when the narrator suggests that her future moods will recall Rome in way that resembles the images projected by a magic-lantern. This is an intriguing reference to an item of visual technology more often associated with later modernist writers like Proust or T. S. Eliot, as in Prufrock's fraught exclamation: "It is impossible to say just what

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<sup>30</sup> For the argument that the scene intuits a crisis of historicity, see Jim Reilly, *Shadowtime: History and Representation in Hardy, Conrad and George Eliot*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

I mean! / But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen.”<sup>31</sup> As in those writers, the magic lantern serves for George Eliot as a figure for confused perception and a multiplier of psychological reality. She uses it to imply contact with an uncertain, projected world, where experience is mediated by a flickering procession of images. Popular as a form of domestic entertainment by the end of the Victorian era, magic lanterns were used especially for imaginative entry into a visual realm of ghouls and grotesquery, for figuring the unreal and macabre. As the cultural historian Laurent Mannoni comments: “The ‘magic’ lantern... represents the longest-lasting, most inventive, and most artistic of the ‘ancestors’ which were eventually snuffed out by the birth of the cinema. For the whole length of its reign, which extended over three centuries, it presented artificial fixed and moving images to a public ever more filled with wonder.” It was, he notes, “never so much in demand, so widely sold, so much *à la mode* as in the second half of the nineteenth century.”<sup>32</sup>

In *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774)—with which Eliot and Lewes were unusually well acquainted<sup>33</sup>—Goethe’s narrator asks: “What is a magic-lantern without light? You have only to position the lamp and there you have the most colourful pictures on your white wall! And even if there were nothing more to it all than that, a few fleeting shadows, it would still give us happiness to stand there like young children, delighted by the marvellous apparitions.”<sup>34</sup> In Rome, Dorothea is similarly confronted by apparitions, though the effect numbs her personality rather than delighting it. There is much to detain, not entertain, her eye. Goethe’s lines show how the magic lantern’s phantoms and ghosts were designed give its

<sup>31</sup> T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” *Collected Poems*. London: Faber, 1936, p. 15; ll. 104-5.

<sup>32</sup> Laurent Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema*. trans. ed. Richard Crangle. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000, p. 33; p. 264.

<sup>33</sup> Lewes’s early career, especially, was marked by his admiration for Goethe, whose life he wrote between 1854-5. In a letter to Comte in March 1847, at the peak of his enthusiasm for Positivism, Lewes writes: “he [Goethe] is the *only* poet who speaks to civilised man.” G. H. Lewes, *The Letters of George Henry Lewes*. (2 vols) ed. William Baker, Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 1995, I, p. 143.

<sup>34</sup> Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. (1774) trans. Michael Hulse. London: Penguin, 1989, p.54.

audiences a calculated fright, but the thrill always took place at a distance behind the safety of the viewing lens. The nightmarish proposition in the text is that Dorothea has lost that distance between eye and image, carrying her consciousness to a critical point where reality and fantasy border each other. The source of the projected images is importantly both internal and external. The magic lantern therefore signifies not so much the artist's projective power, like the lamp of romantic poetry, but the precariousness of the visual sense.

Another piece of Victorian technology to initiate debate over the authority of perception and the power of the eye was the microscope, as we have already noted. Though not a recent invention, improvements in its magnifying power and precision during the early part of the century meant that by 1875 William Carpenter could speak of the "constantly-widening field of microscopic study," and a "vast army of microscopists."<sup>35</sup> It played an important role in influencing ways of thinking about observation, method and verification, and as a practising scientist himself, Lewes was particularly attuned to these debates. At stake was nothing less than the very nature of visual representation itself, for microscopic enquiry pushed at the boundaries of observability. Such, indeed, is the nature of the instrument. When we peer down a microscope, the acts of seeing, imaging and imagining effectively begin converging, it being conceivable—at least in a theoretical way—that whatever is encountered through the lens exists only by virtue of the action of the visual technology itself. It forces us to ask whether what we are seeing is part of reality, or rather its interpretation. Ian Hacking has argued that in scientific practices generally, "one chief role of experiment is the creation of phenomena," and this would seem to apply especially to microscopic imaging.<sup>36</sup> Around the time that Lewes was developing his psychological theory of perception, the microscope—

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<sup>35</sup> William Carpenter, *The Microscope and its Revelations*. London: J & A Churchill, 5<sup>th</sup> edn, 1875, p. x

<sup>36</sup> He adds: "Experimenters bring into being phenomena that do not naturally exist in a pure state... Most of the phenomena, effects, and events created by the experimenter are like plutonium: they do not exist in nature except possibly on vanishingly rare occasions." Ian Hacking, "Experimentation and Scientific Realism" in Jarrett Leplin, ed. *Scientific Realism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. 155.

like photography—embodied certain attitudes towards visual truth and sanctioned particular ways of looking.<sup>37</sup> It promised a special kind of proximity to material reality, yet also (unlike photography) sought by it out by actively distorting the nature of ordinary perception and altering the model of spectatorship. In doing so, it carried the paradoxical message that reality requires alteration (enlargement, exaggeration) in order to be known satisfactorily. The impact of this idea unfolded in several directions.

First, it estranged the observer from reality by producing evidence of a crowded organic life where hitherto none was assumed to exist. It thus enlarged the definition of reality. In his 1850 study of the microscope, the doctor and geologist Gideon Mantell, for example, marvels at the strange and complex life revealed by magnification, speculating that if a microscopic image were shown to somebody unfamiliar with the instrument, it would surely be “regarded as improbable and as extravagant, as the wildest chimeras of the imagination.”<sup>38</sup> The images it produces confound expectations of how reality should look, and the supposedly familiar natural world turns out to be “teeming with numberless myriads of creatures, which are as unknown and as unapproachable to the great mass of mankind, as are the inhabitants of another planet.”<sup>39</sup> Carpenter, in his own study, reflects that the microscope “finds inexhaustible life where all seems dead, constant activity where all seems motionless, perpetual change where all seems inert.”<sup>40</sup> The microscope summons for the eye the restless complexity of the natural world, and reports back on its mysterious composition. In a notably vivid passage, Mantell writes:

while the *Telescope* enables us to see a system in every star, the *Microscope* unfolds to us a world in every atom. The one instructs us that this mighty

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<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of these representational cruxes in nineteenth-century photography, see Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.

<sup>38</sup> Gideon Algernon Mantell, *The Invisible World Revealed by the Microscope; or, Thoughts on Animalcules*. London: John Murray, 1850, p. 84.

<sup>39</sup> Mantell, *The Invisible World Revealed*, p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> Carpenter, *The Microscope and its Revelations*, p. 24.



globe, with the burden of its people and its countries, is but a grain of sand in the vast field of immensity—the other, that every atom may harbour the tribes and families of a busy population... that within and beneath all that minuteness which the aided eye of man is able to explore, there may be a world of invisible beings; and that could we draw aside the mysterious veil which shrouds it from our senses, we might behold a theatre of as many wonders as Astronomy can unfold...<sup>41</sup>

The value of penetrating this formerly hidden tier of reality was, for writers like Mantell, the way it radically relativised looking. By referring to the telescope, another kind of visual device, his passage looks quite literally in two directions, up to the vastness of the heavens and down towards the immensity of invisible matter. Both suggest the infinite, realigning his sense of our cosmic habitat. Which brings us to the main consequence of the rise of the microscope for attitudes towards vision: its chief result was that naked human sight—the eye exact, as it were—began to seem increasingly arbitrary, limited and flawed. Its traditional primacy and privilege were dramatically opened to question. The naked eye dwelled in the realm of “the petty passions and prejudices of common life,” as Mantell put it, unlike the microscope, which soared beyond them.<sup>42</sup> And by helping to denaturalise ordinary sight, the microscope intensified the mid-Victorian fascination with the processes of looking and knowing in general, drawing critical attention to observation as an act itself. “It cannot be too strongly or too constantly kept in view,” Carpenter writes, “that the value of the results of microscopic enquiry will depend far more upon the sagacity, perseverance, and accuracy of the Observer, than upon the elaborateness of his instrument.”<sup>43</sup>

The microscopic spectacle could seem at once true and untrue, authentically close to nature and yet also defamiliarising and strange—even fantastical. It made the viewer confront an alternative, unhomely representation of a world which they

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<sup>41</sup> Mantell, *The Invisible World Revealed*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>42</sup> Mantell, *The Invisible World Revealed*, p. 91.

<sup>43</sup> Carpenter, *The Microscope and its Revelations*, p. 27.

presumed already to understand, and forced them to consider how mediation and interpretation participate in the representational process. This lent discussion of the microscope an epistemological excitement. It showed that, as Ian Hacking says, “Inference and interaction are the stuff of reality... Microscopes carry conviction because of the great array of interactions and interpretations that are possible.”<sup>44</sup> For Lewes, as we shall see, the inferential process was inescapably part of all perception, not just sight aided by the microscope. And where he makes explicit reference to seeing through microscopes, Lewes seems to emphasise how it makes perception problematic, complicating rather than simplifying phenomena. In *The Physiology of Common Life*, for example, he points out in his account of the blood how “the microscope reveals it to be far from a simple fluid,” and shows that “the fluid itself is constantly changing.”<sup>45</sup> It demonstrates that what commonly we grasp as a simple substance—the “mighty river of life,” as he epically describes it, or “the wondrous fluid we name Blood”—is actually heterogeneously mixed:

All analyses of the Blood hitherto have been only rough estimates. In fact, the fluid itself is constantly changing... [F]or although we speak of ‘the blood’ as if it were always one and the same thing, it is, in truth, a system of various fluids, a confluence of streams, each more or less differing from the other.”<sup>46</sup>

Microscopic vision thus revises our understanding. And its object, here, the blood, is deconstructed, unravelled into its many separate identities, as a result of microscopic enlargement. There is no simple biological reality answering directly or literally to the term blood. Analysis, in other words, does not so much pin down its object as cause it to dissipate before the gaze. The idea which Lewes’s passage readily intuit is that perception intervenes in and problematises the real, by providing a set of conditions which partially determine the nature of what it

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<sup>44</sup> Hacking, “Experimentation and Scientific Realism,” p. 160.

<sup>45</sup> Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life*, I, pp. 261-63.

<sup>46</sup> Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life*, I p. 239; p. 284; pp. 263-65.

perceives. Just as the blood itself is “incessantly passing through changes, which changes are the *conditions* of all development and activity,” so perception modifies the things in its purview and conditions the frame of representation.<sup>47</sup> We shall turn now to his main writings on perception to examine this in more detail.

### **Problems of (Pre)Perception**

Lewes’s consideration of perception from a psychological point of view takes place primarily in his *Problems of Life and Mind* (1874-9). The *Problems*, spanning five uneven volumes and dealing with a blend of entangled philosophical, psychological and evolutionary subjects, make fascinating and problematic reading. It demonstrates, as Frederic Harrison remarked in a review of volume one, how at the time philosophy was “visibly transforming itself.”<sup>48</sup> The first two parts of the *Problems* describe the scientific method, explore problems of philosophising, and discuss the limitations of knowledge; in broad terms, they concern epistemology. They deal with the nature of truth and the role of logic, and give an account of the rational tools of intellectual enquiry, such as deduction, induction and judgment. In the third volume, subtitled *The Physical Basis of Mind*, the subject shifts to biological life, and treats the human as yet another organism. Here Lewes outlines the nervous system, automatism and unconscious behaviour, the reflex theory and natural selection. The last two volumes take up questions of psychology: the role of the senses and the sensorium, ideation, memory, mental association, imagination, as well as the nature and character of volition and will.

Summarised in this way, the content and organisation of the *Problems* seems conventional and even orderly. However, the experience of reading Lewes’s text dispels this assumption. Its narrative thread circles around itself, in sometimes disorienting and repetitious ways, rather than conceiving its journey as a straight

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<sup>47</sup> Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life*, I, p.289.

<sup>48</sup> Frederic Harrison, “Mr Lewes’s *Problems of Life and Mind*,” *Fortnightly Review* New Series 16, 1874, p. 89.

line of unfolding meaning. Its style embraces detour and digression, making chance seem an important aspect of its formal design. To an extent this reflects the characteristic exuberance of his engagement with what are evidently urgent and expansive questions. (Spencer, after all, covers similar evolutionary ground and maintains an even and oddly blank narrative point of view, as we shall see.) But the forceful and slightly chaotic propulsion of the *Problems* is related to wider tensions existing beyond Lewes himself. The resistance to unity, formally, in his work points to an epistemological trend in the thought and writing of the period which identifies proliferation as a new dynamic of analysis—as an aspect of knowledge, matter, consciousness, culture, and so on. More will be said about this development in the last chapter, for it springs out of a growing mid-Victorian interest in the effects of relativity. As Christopher Herbert suggests, relativity theories implied that things are “rigorously bound up together in a single indivisible world,” but also that “this world is not one after all, but uncontrollably multiple.”<sup>49</sup> The restlessness of Lewes’s narrative, which itself begins in volume one by invoking the ‘Principle of Relativity’, embodies this paradoxical resistance to unity.<sup>50</sup> Harrison’s review, too, stresses the “dispersive tendencies of the spirit of detail in science,” and notes a “growing anxiety” over the question of its descriptive unity: “This thirst after an organization of knowledge is becoming more conscious and more defined, even whilst the daily accumulation of materials seems to make the task more severe.”<sup>51</sup> It seems from Harrison’s diagnosis that the disruptive energies might be winning out.

Rather like an organism “incessantly undergoing modifications,” the narrative of the *Problems* exhibits evidence of constant stimulation and change.<sup>52</sup> It turns and loops and radiates endlessly, enforcing meaning in reiterative patterns and building leitmotifs, such as the theme of the limitation of our knowledge. Its

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<sup>49</sup> Christopher Herbert, *Victorian Relativity: Radical Thought and Scientific Discovery*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2001, p. 50.

<sup>50</sup> G. H. Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, *The Foundations of a Creed*. (2 vols) London: Trübner and Co., 1874, I, pp. 196–455.

<sup>51</sup> Harrison, “Mr Lewes’s *Problems of Life and Mind*,” p. 89.

<sup>52</sup> G. H. Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, *The Study of Psychology: Its Object, Scope and Method*. (2 vols) London: Trübner and Co., 1879, II, p. 92.

parts do not unfold as though they were pieces being fitting into a jigsaw puzzle, gradually making up a complete picture. It has instead a rougher, unfinished, open-ended texture. This means that it does not address subjects and then duly move beyond them, in logical sequence, to the next topic. Despite some of the taxonomic order implied by the headings and divisions, the story swirls around perpetually as it encompasses different aspects of psychology and epistemology. Like in the organic system itself, the whole is implied in each moment of the narrative. The later concerns are there already in the early pages; and, likewise, the concern with epistemology does not disappear in the later treatment of sensibility, consciousness and the will. Therefore the question of perception—like everything else in the *Problems*—is not limited to or contained by a specific section of the text. It is a recurrent theme, breaking in frequently on other discussions, as well as generating wider questions itself about the nature of knowledge. For Lewes, sight and vision are so fundamental to the felt quality of experience that it would be both artificial and illogical to separate them cleanly from this larger picture.

That said, his arguments concede time and again that although experience in itself forms a seamless continuity, we are compelled by the nature of analysis to impose distinctions on it such as Thought and Feeling. Similarly, then, perception can be analysed as if a distinct function of the organism, even though in reality the phenomena that fall under it are fully integrated aspects of the functioning of the whole system:

[E]very perception instead of being the reaction of a single organ is the resultant of the combined reactions of the whole Organism; the only question in each case being the relative proportions of the parts involved, and how far the irradiation has been restricted to certain channels. The several Senses are no more vicarious than the several Secretions; and when we see an apple we do not in the visual sensation include the sensations of taste, fragrance, resistance, &c., which are all more or less excited by the irradiation of the optical stimulus. It is the non-recognition of this which originates many of

the difficulties touching the theory of Vision. The organic seat of Vision is too often assumed to be the retina; whereas that is only the seat of the visual excitation, which in the Perceptive Centre is blended with the residua of the other excitations.<sup>53</sup>

The point being driven home here has several important aspects, all of which need to be grasped in order to comprehend Lewes's theory of perception. What they have in common is a basic resistance to the naïvely realist or common sense belief in the directness and simplicity of perception. First, the retina should not be considered the centre of vision or the sole organ of sight, nor should it be assumed that its function amounts to a kind of literal mirroring activity; second, optical sensations radiate outwards and they incorporate responses from other senses (the perception of the apple involves more than just visual data); and third, every perception is a "combined reaction" of the entire mind to a particular stimulus, in other words a deeply psychological and multifaceted phenomenon.

Starting with the retina, we shall address these points in Lewes's theory as a whole. Developments in nineteenth-century physiology had shown that the light-sensitive surface of the retina contains numerous responsive sites. Herbert Spencer describes how it is "a tract of multitudinous separate sensitive agents which, by the focalised rays cast upon it, is enabled to touch the images of surrounding objects, as the skin touches the objects themselves."<sup>54</sup> Its stimulations are therefore multiple, simultaneous and relatively independent from one another, the retina's physical structure permitting more than one reaction to take place in the instant of its response. Spencer states: "Evidently, then, it is only by a certain license that the internal change produced by any visual impression can be called single. It is in reality a multitude of simultaneous changes bound together." Hence our physical impressions from the retina are "yet in reality compound ones." And in waking life

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<sup>53</sup> G. H. Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, *The Foundations of a Creed*. (2 vols) London: Trübner and Co., 1874, I, p. 132.

<sup>54</sup> Herbert Spencer, "Our Space-Consciousness: A Reply," *Mind* 15, 59, 1890, p. 318.



the retina receives these multiple impressions constantly, in differing degrees of intensity and duration, and in such a dense manner that we have to acknowledge the “difficulty of regarding this visually-produced consciousness as single.”<sup>55</sup> In this respect, the retinal surface could be thought of as comprising countless smaller retinas, each relaying their own sensory responses.

The significance of this picture is that it raises the issue of the complexity of sensations themselves, the very currency of empiricism. Traditionally taken to be a sort of mental base unit, which at a higher level of psychological organisation resolve themselves into perceptions, sensations indicate the subjective equivalent of rudimentary physical impressions, such as those originating in the retina. But Lewes argues that even this relatively lowly type of mental phenomena is not really monadic at all. As Alexander Bain describes it, theirs is “a mixed mode,” not a pure element.<sup>56</sup> This applies, Lewes says, “even in sensations of colour, commonly held to be simple affections of the retina.” Far from being rustic and honest characters in the drama of perception, sensations draw on the cooperation of other sensory responses in complex groupings. “Sensation, we constantly repeat,” he goes on, “is not a simple but a highly complex state: it is a feeling which is resultant of various components, one of these being what is called the stimulation of a sense organ; and the others being those classed under sensorial reaction.”<sup>57</sup> Sensations can deceive; under hypnosis, for example, they can be made report that water is wine, or that pain is a pleasure, and to this extent they almost could be said to perform a kind of intellectual judgment (and misjudgment). Our sensations, then, are not the raw or neutral data of experience, but already part of an interpretative response to the world of external stimuli.

At the heart of Lewes’s theory there is a recognition that impressions and sensations do not merely subside or pass away. They leave traces of themselves,

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<sup>55</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, p. 502-3.

<sup>56</sup> Alexander Bain, “On ‘Association’—Controversies,” *Mind* 12, 46, 1887, p. 169.

<sup>57</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, II, p. 275-76.

mental residua which in turn play a part in shaping the course of future sensory excitements: “each stimulation leaves behind it a tremor which does not immediately subside,” he suggests, and the “lingering effect of an impression enables a comparison to be made with a new impression.”<sup>58</sup> Though this sounds orderly, it threatens chaos; not only is the visual sense being constantly stimulated by its environment in ways not even consciously registered, the complex accretion of impressions creates a whirl of interactions and adjustments between present sensations and traces revived from the past. Thus “the mechanism is essentially a fluctuating one, its elements being combined, recombined, and resolved under infinite variations of stimulation.”<sup>59</sup> The re-excitability of trace-impressions has a lively, destabilising influence, psychologically.

What it causes, according to Lewes, is a vibrant, coursing inner life from which perceptual experience cannot be separated. It is not so much that our vision occasionally finds itself influenced by mood or memory, but that perception is this process. That is to say, a single act of seeing brings into play—as a condition of its very possibility—these chaotic and interwoven traces of earlier sensations. “Each perception,” he argues, “is itself the revival of many past experiences, and is by them *apperceived*... It is by the *residua*, or modifications impressed by past experiences that fresh perceptions are cognised, and old ones *re-cognised*.”<sup>60</sup> This aspect of Lewes’s theory is crucial. It forms what he calls ‘preperception’, the conditions enabling perception to occur by binding it to a centre of personality, a subjective identity. Who we are will determine how or what we perceive (“the more we *are*, the more we *see*”). Echoing a very similar idea in Ruskin, Lewes proposes that if four men gaze upon the same sunset, “all will have similar visual impressions, but each will react on these according to his personal disposition.”<sup>61</sup> By this theory, perception becomes relativistic in more than a narrowly

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<sup>58</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, II, p. 52; p. 305.

<sup>59</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, II, p. 52.

<sup>60</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, II, pp. 106-7.

<sup>61</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, II, p. 201.

psychological sense. It ties in closely with epistemological relativism, by appearing to deny that any of these variously personalised angles of observation will be preferred over any other.

In short, Lewes offers an inferential theory of perception. The content of a particular perception always arises as the result of a process of inference and judgment, as he explains in the first volume:

The object is a group of sensibles; any one of these is capable of reviving the feeling of the others. Inference thus lies at the very root of mental life, for the very combination of present feelings with past feelings, and the consequent inference that what was formerly felt in conjunction with any one group of feelings, will again be felt if the conditions are reinstated—that the sweetness and fragrance formerly experienced in conjunction with the colour and form of the apple, are again to be revived when the organs of Taste and Smell are brought into relation with this coloured object—this act of inference is necessary to the perception of the object ‘apple’, and is like in kind to all other judgments. Inference is ‘seeing with the mind’s eye’...<sup>62</sup>

Spencer calls this acquired perception. Like Lewes, he argues that even the smallest and most seemingly direct perceptions function inferentially. The simple act of identifying the apple qualifies as a “composite state of consciousness,” for it entails on closer analysis a complex group of mental states combined and classified under a single name.<sup>63</sup> The symbol ‘apple’ serves only to indicate a set of open relations between groups of associated conscious states; it does not have a single, necessary or essential meaning. When we look at an object, countless rapid inferential judgments attend the observation, most obvious being those that lend it spatial dimensions and depth, even though physical laws mean that certain sides of the object will be concealed from view. Or, to take an example from Spencer, if we witness the melting of a piece of lead, the “perception of melting is, in reality, a

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<sup>62</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, I, p. 257.

<sup>63</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, p. 202.

rational interpretation of the appearances—a classing of them with the like appearances before known.”<sup>64</sup> Inference, in effect, converts groups of sensations into narratives (here a story of causality). In a Humean way, the perceived causality strictly exists in the associating mind of the observer only.

Lewes, in the *Problems*, describes the process as a judgment, an intellectual act rather than a sensory one—or rather, for him, there is no real difference:

A perception is always a judgment; the effect of the present stimulation is combined with and ranged under the residua of past stimulations. The sight of an object recalls its unseen qualities. We see the qualities of colour and form, and infer the qualities of solidity, taste, scent, &c., though these once-felt qualities are now unfelt. This is the process of Inference. We infer that when the coloured object is brought within the range of other senses than the eye, it will yield certain feelings. Inference is visual sensation.<sup>65</sup>

In some respects, the theory is an arrestingly problematic one: where does the purely sensory end and the inferential begin? How much does the mind construe of the world? For Lewes, there can be no way of telling, for mental states slide and meld into each other effortlessly. Feelings, perceptions and judgments are, in the end, similar aspects of mental life. They mix and mingle, in ways not so far removed from the ‘diseased’ retina of Dorothea in Rome. Her blurrings of mind and world, and the strong emotional register of her perceptions, while she remains rooted in obvious ways to her distinct physical self, all suggest that the episode can validly be read as merely an exaggeration of what Lewes would say were the ordinary psychological conditions of looking. All perception might to some extent bear the kinds of pressures exerted on Dorothea so memorably in Eliot’s passage; and all vision might be affected—or, to continue the medical language, infected—by its distorting and disorienting effects.

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<sup>64</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, pp. 187-88.

<sup>65</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, II, p. 225.

In fact, Lewes shows considerable awareness of the risks and shortcomings of inferential vision. Error, he argues, is an unavoidable counterpart of how we view the world. The mediations of past sensation and feeling, and the habitual inferences of the mind, mean that the visual sense suffers from a significant vulnerability. These patternings can easily cause the mind to mistakenly identify or misrecognise the nature of the things it infers. "Since in a simple case of direct Perception we are liable to err," he remarks, "it is intelligible how great must be the liability in more complex mental operations."<sup>66</sup> A crux in the plot of Lewes's novel *Ranthorpe* can be read in light of this. In Book 5, entitled 'The Dream', we find Isola, the estranged lover of the story's protagonist Percy, in a state of anguish; having agreed mistakenly to marry the boorish Harry Cavendish, she suddenly yearns to be reunited with the young poet. Her desire expresses itself in a vivid and romantically charged dream, which she still seems to inhabit when she awakes the following morning calling out for Percy. How can dreams exert such a pull over us, asks the narrator, before noting that they are "one of the manifold, unappreciable influences which mould and modify the condition of the mind."<sup>67</sup> In her dreamlike state, Isola imagines hearing Percy's voice calling back through the wall—until it is revealed that the sounds she hears are actually real, and that he is indeed in the neighbouring room. The discovery leads, predictably, to the two lovers' temporary reconciliation. Despite its use of a mawkish romance plot, the scene is intriguing, precisely because it teaches that an illusory state of mind—the one moulded and modified and conditioned—turns out to be the more reliable and accurate. It lends greater credence to the dreamy mode of perception, filled out with desire and personality, not because the novel advocates walking through life in a dream but because in reality (rather than in the plot of romantic fiction) ordinary perception is typified by deeply irrational processes of the kind the narrator describes.

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<sup>66</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, I, p. 258.

<sup>67</sup> Lewes, *Ranthorpe*, p. 293.

What, then, are the significant elements in Lewes's theory? For one thing, it suggests a scepticism towards the rational possibilities of the eye, and seems suspicious of its assumed primacy. "The predominance of the Eye has its disadvantages when we endeavour to explain mental processes. It has led to the universal explanation of mental processes by the analogy of vision. What we cannot see clearly we are supposed not to think accurately."<sup>68</sup> Second, the indirectness of perception establishes an important dialectical exchange in time between mind and object, by virtue of its having responded to the world through the visual sense. The same self encountering the sensory world in the hope of gaining reliable knowledge of it, is transformed in turn by that very gesture:

The Inner Life thus represents the whole of our Experience... Through it all feelings are capable of revival even in the absence of their original stimuli: and this revival makes *preperception* a factor in perception; recognition a factor in cognition. Varying the diction in Tennyson's *Ulysses*—'I am part of all that I have met'—we may say with equal truth, though not with equal rhythm, 'I am the product of all that I have felt.'<sup>69</sup>

Experience constitutes the fabric of empiricism's knowledge, yet it also transfigures the subject at the centre of its epistemology. The philosopher Thomas Nagel writes that, "The most familiar scene of [epistemological] conflict is the pursuit of objective knowledge, whose aim naturally described in terms that, taken literally, are unintelligible: we must get outside of ourselves, and view the world from nowhere within it."<sup>70</sup> Lewes's theory of perception complicates this aspiration, however, by stressing the constructive role of the mind in perception and by showing how the psychology of the gaze both facilitates and limits the scope of its visual knowledge. Error and doubt are as characteristic of its perceptual reach as unveiling and disclosure. This fact runs counter to the prevailing view that

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<sup>68</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, II, p. 358.

<sup>69</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, II, pp. 86-87.

<sup>70</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 67.



nineteenth-century empiricism valorises both the gaze and detached observation. As Amanda Anderson puts it: "An ideal of critical distance, itself deriving from the project of the Enlightenment, lies behind many Victorian and aesthetic and intellectual projects, including the emergent human sciences and allied projects of social reform."<sup>71</sup> Detachment, as she argues, has multiple and often contradictory meanings in Victorian culture; for example, its advantage of distance might afford a more panoramic view but it might just as easily signal marginality or exclusion, which threaten the legitimacy of the subject's position.<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless, for empiricist writers like Lewes the knowability of the visual world stresses the need to take account of the mental conditions and contingencies of perception.

It should be clarified that in his argument this commitment does not entail a turn towards idealism. Lewes notes that idealism "reduces Existence to a mere panorama of mental states," whereas he recognises instead, as a good empiricist, that "Experience expresses both physical and mental aspects, and that a Not-Self is everywhere indissolubly interwoven with Self."<sup>73</sup> But it should be noted here that the pervasive uncertainty about perception—the very practice upon which empiricism is usually said to be able to predicate confident knowledge—does not mean for Lewes, or for a writer like George Eliot, that the material world might vanish right before the bewildered eyes of the observer. Rather it is to illustrate that their attitudes towards the act of seeing, and also therefore knowing, are complex, indirect, inferential (rather than referential) and bound up in important respects with the personality of the spectator. To some extent, the very inexactness of the eye thereby serves somewhat to redeem it, modestly humanising its aspirations for knowledge. In the next chapter we shall explore how this becomes attached in the mid-century to the related question of the knower's physical embodiment.

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<sup>71</sup> Amanda Anderson, *Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 4.

<sup>72</sup> "Foucauldian analyses of disciplinary power assert not only that forms of ostensibly impartial knowledge were used to codify and control, but also that subjective experiences of autonomy and critical distance are generated via a subtle ruse of modern power, which renders subjects docile by creating illusions of freedom at the heart of interior mental life." Anderson, *Powers of Distance*, p. 25.

<sup>73</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, p. 318.

## Chapter Four

### ‘As Deep as the Viscera’:

#### Alexander Bain, Spinoza, and the Knowing Body

Recently it has become commonplace, perhaps even rather obvious, to point out that the history of philosophy is marked everywhere by its exclusion of the body.<sup>1</sup> In Plato, Descartes and Kant, three fulcra of the Western tradition, it is now common to recall, the body acquired its notorious status as the other of reason, idea, logos, soul, truth, and so on, in a series of forceful articulations of that exclusion. Unable to integrate the bodily realm satisfactorily, philosophy from the beginning cast it as the problematic remainder of metaphysics, figuring it variously as a cave, prison, womb or tomb from which it would be desirable and finally possible to take flight.<sup>2</sup> In line with this critique, the task of rectifying the body's repression has become a matter of tremendous urgency. In some circles of cultural criticism, the body has become a highly fashionable topic (a body often gendered, sexualised, or otherwise politically inscribed), requiring theory emphatically to supplant the traditional discourse of the soul. As Terry Eagleton says: "If soul discourse is to be replaced by body discourse, then one can see the point of dropping talk of *having* a body and substituting talk of *being* one."<sup>3</sup> Alexander Bain, and others, however, advanced a much longer version of exactly this sort of argument in the middle decades of the

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<sup>1</sup> For a representative selection of theoretical approaches to the question of the body, beginning with an acknowledgement of its repression by and within the domain of the 'philosophical', and combining a variety of approaches such as psychoanalysis, feminism, deconstruction and cultural studies, see Juliet Flower MacCannell and Laura Zakarin, eds. *Thinking Bodies*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> This position is now widely held, but see for example Jean-Luc Nancy, "Corpus" in MacCannell and Zakarin, eds. *Thinking Bodies*, pp. 17-31.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. 74.

nineteenth century. For Bain, a philosopher squarely in the British empiricist tradition, we *are* our bodies in the sense that Eagleton suggests. Or, at least, Bain saw that the self can only be grasped inside untranscendable bodily structures and processes. This was a view he shared with contemporaries like G. H. Lewes and Herbert Spencer, other key proponents of mid-Victorian ‘psycho-physics’. Their empiricism necessitated reconnecting the body to epistemology. If the history of philosophy is said to have struggled to reconcile itself with the notion of embodiment, then Bain’s work should be acknowledged as signalling a turn towards the body which troubles the neatness of this view. For the concept of the body rests, as it were, at the heart of his thinking.

Born in Aberdeen to a family of weavers in 1818, Bain was influenced in his early career by the philosophical tradition of Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart, but he quickly rejected the “unbridled metaphysical speculation that characterised the Scottish School,” as one intellectual obituarist put it.<sup>4</sup> Thereafter, despite serious opposition to his work from religious critics, which ultimately thwarted his chances of gaining a professorship until 1860, Bain’s thought developed under the influence and friendship of John Stuart Mill and his circle of London intellectuals. By the 1840s, he was contributing reviews and articles to journals like the *Westminster Review* (edited at one point by George Eliot) on topics as varied as induction, logic, mental philosophy, animal instincts and language, eventually founding *Mind* in 1876, perhaps his strongest and most obvious legacy. At the centre of his mature thinking was an attempt to refute the disembodied conception of mind posited traditionally by philosophy. “The union of Body and Mind,” he argued, “has long been considered *the* mystery by pre-eminence. The prevailing opinion has been that this connexion would for ever resist and paralyze explanation.”<sup>5</sup> Opposing such mystification, Bain thought, was essential to a modern philosophical standpoint. A

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<sup>4</sup> William L. Davidson, “Professor Bain’s Philosophy,” *Mind* New Series 13, 50, 1904, p. 161.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Bain, *Logic*. (1870) (2 vols) London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 1873, II, p. 127.

critique of dualism thus animates the central point in his thinking. His objective was to apply physiological analysis to mental philosophy, predicated on a thoroughgoing relational contact between mind and body. Indeed, this principle supplies the broad framework for his two major works of psychology, *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855) and *The Emotions and the Will* (1859), a pair of texts that address human psychology at the level of the nervous system as well as high-level cognitive structures. Conveyed throughout, by the form and structure of the works as well as their content, is the idea of an organic integration of consciousness with impressible flesh and blood. They demonstrate how even the 'highest' faculties and human abilities are constrained by their relation to living physical tissue.

As Bain knew all too well, though, the body poses a peculiar cluster of difficulties for epistemology. For one thing, it is a uniquely unstable object to know, forever just beyond the reach of observation. After all, how does one witness the living mechanism of the body—the realm of organs, vessels and nerves hidden beneath the covering of the skin—without interrupting or fatally arresting its functionings? To see the blood flowing directly around the cardiovascular system, for example, one would be required to penetrate the skin concealing it, a gesture guaranteed to cause the cessation of the phenomenon at the very moment of its revelation. One would, indeed, have to murder to dissect. Even then, the vital activity occurring inside our material bodies would continue to confound the gaze. In sum, no vantage point exists that will allow us to see the bodily mechanism transparently alive; instead, it can only be imagined or constructed through auxiliary devices, such as the stethoscope. G. H. Lewes embraced this idea in *The Physiology of Common Life*: "If for a moment we could with the bodily eye see into the frame of man, as with the microscope we see into the transparent frames of some simpler animals, what a spectacle would be unveiled!"<sup>6</sup> But, of course, as Lewes senses here, we *cannot* directly see into the frame of man; unmediated

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<sup>6</sup> G. H. Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life*. (2 vols) London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1859, I, p. 271.

access to the object described by physiology remains necessarily impossible. It points to a realm forever cut off from us, an alien and unknowable region—yet one that happens to exist within ourselves. Physiology thus provides a powerful instantiation the idea of the limits of knowledge, reminding us not just that we are routinely estranged from ourselves, but that the very principle of uncertainty affects our relation to reality at its most quotidian and familiar. As embodied creatures, we are walking examples of unknowability.

A further dimension of the problem for empiricists like Bain arose from the role played by the body in *a posteriori* theories of knowledge. Not only was it an enigmatic object to grasp, the body supplied the means by which knowledge of any kind could be acquired. (At its most extreme, empiricism could logically argue that really all our knowledge acquaints us with is the modifications of the body.) For Bain, the act of knowing has to take place through the sensuous body. Without bodies, his empiricism insists, there would be no mode of epistemological access to the world of objects beyond our selves. The muscles, for example, register in a most basic way the body's physical resistance to whatever exists that is not us, providing the basic structural conditions which enable us even to think the possibility of a self/world opposition. This muscular sensation of differentiation is, Bain argues, an epistemological as much as a bodily fact: "By this experience we body forth to ourselves a notion of the external world. In the sense of energy exerted, we are said to go out of self, or to constitute a something in vital contrast to all the rest of our mental experiences, a *not me* as opposed to the *me* of passive sensibility and thought."<sup>7</sup> Knowledge thus commences in crude physical sensations of pressure and energy, and more specifically pleasure and pain.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect*. (1855) London: Longman, Roberts and Green, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1864, p. 98.

<sup>8</sup> "This function of our muscular sensibility arises, in the first instance, from our being conscious of the different *degrees* of it... This change of feeling is Discrimination, and is the basis of our intelligence; [considered] as pleasure or pain, is nothing, but as the commencement of knowledge, it is all-important." Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect*, p. 106.

The previous chapter established the subjective conditions upon which the empiricist theory of perception depends. For Bain, the related acts of seeing and knowing incorporate the specificity of the observer's body, too. This concept of the knowing body, and of the body as an arena in which subjectivity materialises itself, forms the concern of the present chapter. Mid-Victorian empiricism engaged profoundly with problems relating to embodiment, and with knowledge as embodied within (and represented by) the bodily system. Bain's work responds especially keenly to these issues, but they extend across the other writers as ongoing interrelated questions surrounding mind-body interaction. And one context for their engagement with it (even perhaps a surprising measure of it) can be found in a sudden surge of interest in the philosophy of Spinoza which occurred in the period. On the face of it, this might seem unlikely—perhaps especially so, given the Victorians' reputation for scientific positivism—yet it is a feature of the mid-century that the popularity of Spinoza suddenly took hold in British culture alongside the careers of writers like Bain and Lewes. Why this apparently strange coexistence should have occurred is the first question we shall address.

### **Spinoza in the Nineteenth Century**

Between 1854 and 1856, while Bain and Spencer were publishing their first major studies of psychology, George Eliot was immersed in the task of translating Spinoza's *Ethics* (1677). Before the middle of the nineteenth century relatively little attention had been given to Spinoza by British philosophers, in part because his geometrical style of metaphysics was antithetical to the spirit of eighteenth-century empiricism, and also because of his unpalatable reputation as an atheist. As Lewes remarked, "the accusation of Spinozism was another name for atheism, and deliberate yielding of the soul to Satan."<sup>9</sup> Although Coleridge had absorbed Spinoza's writings as part of his immersion in Continental metaphysics, and Shelley

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<sup>9</sup> G. H. Lewes, *The History of Philosophy from Thales to Comte*. (2 vols) London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1867, II, p. 161.



too had been drawn to his religious radicalism, no one before Eliot's generation championed the philosopher in the way that Goethe had done in Germany. By 1878, however, the philosopher Frederick Pollock was commenting in the journal *Mind* that "in the *Ethics* of Spinoza we have one of the most remarkable achievements of constructive philosophic genius ever given to the world."<sup>10</sup> Such keen praise was commonly accepted by this time as being neither eccentric nor misguided. Lewes, who was among the first in Britain to give Spinoza serious critical consideration, believed the *Ethics* opened "a new era in History."<sup>11</sup> Carlyle's literary executor, J. A. Froude, who grudgingly acknowledged in 1855 that "Spinoza's influence over European thought is too great to be denied or set aside," eventually became another important channel for the dissemination of his ideas.<sup>12</sup> At the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, the high Anglican Tory F. D. Maurice interpreted Spinoza's system in line with his own transcendental, quasi-theological moral philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, so various were these importers of Spinoza that John Caird, Principal of Glasgow University and influential Hegelian, felt it necessary to open his 1887 monograph on the philosopher by chiding contemporaries who made Spinoza "side in appearance" with their own political and intellectual agendas.<sup>14</sup>

There was, then, an increasingly widespread recognition in the second half of the nineteenth century that Spinoza was a central figure in modern thought, an opinion few in Britain endorsed before the 1850s. As the Victorian translator R. H. M. Elwes remarked in 1883, "very few years ago the writings of Spinoza were almost unknown in this country."<sup>15</sup> This striking shift in attitudes was also noticed

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<sup>10</sup> Frederick Pollock, "Notes on the Philosophy of Spinoza," *Mind* 3, 10, 1878, p. 195.

<sup>11</sup> Lewes, *The History of Philosophy*, II, p. 225.

<sup>12</sup> J. A. Froude, *Essays in Literature and History*. ed. Ernest Rhys. London: J. M. Dent, 1906, p. 226.

<sup>13</sup> F. D. Maurice, *Modern Philosophy; or A Treatise of Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy from the Fourteenth Century to the French Revolution with a Glimpse into the Nineteenth Century*. London: Griffin, Bohn, and Company, 1862, pp. 373-432.

<sup>14</sup> John Caird, *Spinoza*. Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1887, pp. 2-3.

<sup>15</sup> R. H. M. Elwes (trans. ed.), *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*. (2 vols) London: George Bell and Sons, 1883, p. v.

by Matthew Arnold, who described in 1863 how historically surprising, if not unlikely, Spinoza's newfound popularity seemed:

[I]n spite of the seclusion, in spite of the shortness of his career, in spite of the hostility of the dispensers of renown in the 18<sup>th</sup> century—of Voltaire's disparagement and [Pierre] Bayle's detraction—in spite of the repellent form which he has given to his principal work, in spite of the exterior semblance of a rigid dogmatism alien to the most essential tendencies of modern philosophy, in spite, finally, of the immense weight of disfavour cast upon him by the long-repeated charge of atheism, Spinoza's name has silently risen in importance, the man and his work have attracted a steadily increasing notice, and bid fair to become soon what they deserve to become—in the history of modern philosophy the central point of interest.<sup>16</sup>

George Eliot herself had recognised Spinoza's importance some years before Arnold paid the philosopher this elaborate double-edged compliment. In a letter to Charles Bray in 1849 she wrote, diagnostically: "What is wanted in English is not a translation of Spinoza's works, but a true estimate of his life and system. After one has rendered his Latin faithfully into English, one feels that there is another yet more difficult process of translation for the reader to effect, and that the only mode of making Spinoza accessible to a larger number is to study his books, then shut them out and give an analysis."<sup>17</sup> Since she began writing fiction only months after finishing work on the *Ethics*, it is plausible to consider Eliot's novels as attempting this larger project of Spinozan translation, as Dorothy Atkins has argued.<sup>18</sup> But the detached voice speaking in this letter widens its import beyond the personal, for what animates Eliot here is an issue with a much broader horizon than private ambition: she is hinting at a more general correlation between Spinoza and contemporary British thought. Spinoza has become a crucial figure, she is insisting,

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew Arnold, "A Word More about Spinoza," *Macmillan's Magazine* 9, 1863, pp. 136-7.

<sup>17</sup> George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*. (9 vols) ed. Gordon S. Haight, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-78, II, p. 321.

<sup>18</sup> Dorothy Atkins, *George Eliot and Spinoza*. Salzburg: Institut Für Englische Sprache Und Literatur, Universitat Salzburg, 1978, p. 8.

one who speaks relevantly to the intellectual predicaments and debates of the mid-nineteenth century.

Yet we, too, like Arnold, may wonder why a thinker “alien to the most essential tendencies of modern philosophy” was felt so suddenly to be relevant in the 1850s, a decade which saw the new psychological theory of Bain, Spencer and Lewes, the realist aesthetic theory of Ruskin and Eliot, and which closed on a definitively radical note with the publication of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859). Why should this dawning middle phase of Victorian intellectual history have coincided with the rehabilitation of a seventeenth-century Dutch-Jewish philosopher seemingly rooted in the Cartesian tradition? Why was Eliot, a good empiricist, renouncing metaphysics in her 1855 essay on Otto Friedrich Gruppe at the same time as completing her translation of the *Ethics*?<sup>19</sup>

The turn towards Spinoza in the mid-Victorian period was a turn towards a philosophical system whose logic invalidates common sense and contradicts direct realism.<sup>20</sup> The fundamental assumptions of Thomas Reid’s realism, for example—that the mind opens passively on to the world, that the self has an ontological priority, that there are innate psychological faculties—find no support in Spinoza’s writings. On the contrary, because a monistic theory of substance guides his work, he offers a picture of human existence and knowledge inconsistent in principle with these naïve intuitivist assumptions. While it would be misleading to describe Eliot or any of these writers as disciples of Spinoza, the expanding interest in his writing ought arguably to be framed by the broader context of Victorian empiricist culture,

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<sup>19</sup> See George Eliot, “The Future of German Philosophy” (1855) in *Selected Critical Writings*. ed. Rosemary Ashton, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 137.

<sup>20</sup> For nineteenth-century commentary on Spinoza’s philosophy see: Robert Willis, *Benedict de Spinoza: His Life, Correspondence, and Ethics*. London: Trübner and Co., 1870; James Martineau, *A Study of Spinoza*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1882; John Caird, *Spinoza*. Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1887; Frederick Pollock, *Spinoza: His Life and Philosophy*. London: Duckworth and Co. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1889. For more recent studies see: David Bidney, *The Psychology and Ethics of Spinoza: A Study in the History and Logic of Ideas*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940; Edwin Curley, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969; Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984; R. J. Delahunty, *Spinoza*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985; Alan Donagan, *Spinoza*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988.

which rejected fixed, static and essential categorisations of self and world. In Spinoza lay the possibility of thinking beyond traditional approaches to the issue of epistemology, most obviously the common sense paradigm inherited from Reid, but also the metaphysical claims of the innatist school typified by, amongst others, William Hamilton. Furthermore, Spinoza's work seemed to push challengingly at the limitations of a philosophical (and cultural) landscape carved up reductively into materialist and idealist poles of thought. Like empiricism itself, it sought to establish the ground of knowledge in terms resistant to this basic opposition.

Indeed, the root of Spinoza's appeal for mid-Victorian writers consisted largely in what G. H. Lewes called the epistemological "crisis" introduced by his philosophy, after which "the nature and limits of Knowledge became the most urgent topics." The crucial outcome of the crisis, Lewes insisted, was the transformation of the epistemological question into a psychological one, since for Spinoza the problem of knowledge proceeds from the fact of psychological (and even physical) embodiment: "The crisis, therefore, turns upon this fundamental dispute: Can the human mind transcend the sphere of relative knowledge, and, passing from Consciousness to Causes, explore the nature of things *per se*?"<sup>21</sup> This, as we have seen, was one of the defining questions taken up by mid-century empiricists, and woven into the fabric of works by Ruskin, Eliot, Lewes, Spencer and Bain, so its specific intersection with Spinoza is revealing. By looking briefly at how Spinoza opens this question, and at the relationship outlined in his *Ethics* between consciousness, knowledge and the real, it will become clear that these writers were drawn to a position that allowed the limiting mind/body binarism to be rethought in radically new ways. Spinoza, it will be argued, pointed towards an epistemology freed from restrictive dualisms, where the relationship between thought and matter could be drastically reconfigured. It will be argued, then, that the Victorians' interest in Spinoza coincided with the resurgence of interest in the

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<sup>21</sup> Lewes, *The History of Philosophy*, II, pp. 224-5.

human body—not just a physiological body but, importantly, a thinking body reincorporated into the very epistemological project of empiricism.

In his most influential work, the *Ethics*, which is arranged according to a Euclidian scheme of postulates and proofs, Spinoza rejects a foundational principle of Western metaphysics and Judeo-Christian theology: mind/body dualism. The mind and the body, the infinite and the finite, the spiritual and the material, and so on, do not oppose one another as distinct metaphysical categories or orders, but are aspects of a single, universal and self-subsistent ontology. Reality, expressed in terms of substance, is strictly indivisible for Spinoza. According to this monism, corporeal being is not surrounded and transcended by a metaphysical otherness or absolute exteriority in the form of the familiar anthropomorphic God. Rather than standing outside the world as its unique source, the creator is wholly identical with the creation. All that exists does so as an aspect or attribute of this unified substance, *Deus siva Natura*. Postulate 14 of Book 1, stating that “Except God, no substance can be or be conceived,” is qualified by the following scholium which logically demonstrates this monistic claim:

Since God is an absolutely infinite being, of whom no attribute which expresses an essence of substance can be denied, and he necessarily exists, [then] if there were any substance except God, it would have to be explained through some attribute of God, and so two substances of the same attribute would exist, which is absurd. And so except God, no substance can be or, consequently, be conceived. For if it could be conceived, it would have to be conceived as existing. But this (by the first part of this demonstration) is absurd. Therefore except for God no substance can be or be conceived, q.e.d.<sup>22</sup>

Ingeniously, Spinoza justifies his monism here by applying a version of the ontological argument: since infiniteness and existence have to pertain attributively to the nature of a substance, then logically only one substance can exist. Just as it

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<sup>22</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*. (1677) trans. ed. Edwin Curley. London: Penguin, 1996, pp. 9-10.

would contradict God's essence for God not to exist, so it would contradict God's infinite nature if a further substance other than God existed. Thus, according to Spinoza's metaphysical vision, all being exists in and through the one divine substance, the attributes of which are infinite. Relative to the world, God is the *causa immanens omnium*—"the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things"—and so reality at its most basic structural level can be described in terms of an impersonal God-substance ("a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes") and its modes.<sup>23</sup> What is striking about this theory of ontology is its avoidance of human analogy. Substances and modes are not modelled anthropomorphically, God bears no resemblance to a thinking, willing, judging being, and the human subject is not a necessary or pivotal ontological category. In other words, the sovereignty famously attributed to Cartesian subjectivity has no precedent to mirror in either God or nature. Those who "feign a God, like man, consisting of a body and a mind, and subject to passions," Spinoza says, "wander from the true knowledge of God."<sup>24</sup> Likewise, men who commonly "consider all natural things as means to their own advantage," as if the physical scheme were essentially sympathetic to human desires and destinies, falsely project their own image on to nature.<sup>25</sup> From the monistic standpoint, such anthropocentric prejudices have neither value nor meaning.

The psychological picture that emerges in the *Ethics* therefore challenges humanistic and intuitive conceptions of mental experience. Just like his image of God, who is depersonalised into a faceless and intrinsic principle, Spinoza's theory of psychology describes the human self in the estranging language of geometry, treating "human actions and appetites just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies."<sup>26</sup> In logically reasoned steps, the *Ethics* constructs an anti-Cartesian image of the mind in which the traditional autonomy and immateriality of thought

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<sup>23</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 16; p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 69.



are wholly challenged. Since the impression of independent mental and bodily realms becomes philosophically meaningless in the monistic system, no ground exists from which the concept of pure, monadic, invisible subjectivity might spring. To imagine a rational soul inhabiting a corporeal body—an idealist ghost dwelling in an earthly machine—would contradict *a priori* the first principles of Spinoza's metaphysics. Instead, mind cannot be defined and explained adequately in isolation from body, and identity cannot be considered as an irreducible interiority. For Spinoza, Thought and Extension (the only attributes under which the finite individual can grasp reality) constitute two forms of description, or ways of understanding, rather than separate domains, it being possible to consider a single phenomenon under either designation. This means that a psychological event such as pain may be accounted for both in mental terms (the qualitative experience of pain) and in bodily terms (the occurrence of specific physiological changes) without either description being exhaustively valid or finally preferable. Rather like the picture of two silhouetted human profiles whose relief pattern reveals the image of a vase, the self must be thought of as having twin or parallel aspects. As one commentator puts it, "although the mind and the body are to be regarded as modes of distinguishable attributes, they are also in some sense one and the same thing: *eadem res*."<sup>27</sup>

This parallelism, or double-aspect theory, has a crucial implication elucidated in the second book of the *Ethics*. As it develops, Spinoza's argument repeatedly suggests that mental states not only correlate to physical events, but in fact derive solely from them. In the brief yet contentious Postulate 13, which follows an unusual plea from the author for the reader's unprejudiced attention, Spinoza states: "The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, or a certain mode of extension which actually exists, and nothing else."<sup>28</sup> This radical proposition and its qualifying scholia hold the key to Spinoza's notion of the mind-

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<sup>27</sup> R. J. Delahunty, *Spinoza*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985, p. 179.

<sup>28</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 39.

body union and his psychology. If the “mind is united to the body from the fact that the body is the object of the mind,” then, in effect, mental states begin as representations or ideas of changes (“affections”) occurring within the corporeal economy.<sup>29</sup> It follows that the very possibility of ideas depends on there being bodily affections, a point made explicit later on: “The human mind is capable of perceiving a great many things, and is the more capable, the more its body can be disposed in a great many ways.”<sup>30</sup> More forcefully still, in Postulate 23 he argues: “The mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body.”<sup>31</sup> What this amounts to is a vigorous argument for the primacy of the body in the formation of mental experience. As Errol E. Harris remarks: “Thus the self-sentience of my body, what for Spinoza is the idea of the body, comprehends everything of which I am ever sensuously aware, and it is from this, and on this foundation, that all my ‘ideas’ of whatever kind are elaborated.”<sup>32</sup>

In consequence, Spinoza’s psychology stands resolutely against direct or realist theories of visual representation. Epistemologically speaking, objects cannot be grasped in themselves but only become known through the physical impressions aroused by them in the human frame. “The human mind does not perceive any external body as actually existing,” he reasons, “except through the ideas of the affections of its own body.”<sup>33</sup> In having knowledge of an object, all that our knowledge consists of, in the strictest sense, is the idea of our own physical responses to that proximate stimulus, such as the pressure it exerts on the muscles or the light it reflects into the eyes. Therefore, as another critic argues, Spinoza “would say that the idea which I have of the table informs me rather of the state of my body than of the table. In other words the table reveals itself to me in so far as it induces in me certain processes of body (we should say of brain) which are

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<sup>29</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 48.

<sup>30</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 44.

<sup>31</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> Errol E. Harris, “Body-Mind Relation in Spinoza’s Philosophy” in James B. Wilbur (ed.), *Spinoza’s Metaphysics: Essays in Critical Appreciation*. Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1976, p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 50.

identical with what we call the thought of the table.”<sup>34</sup> So while a mental idea represents a real object “insofar as the external body determines the human body in a certain fixed way,” in no way merely does it mirror outer reality passively. Rather, Spinoza takes a conspicuously sceptical view of ideation: “The idea of any affection of the human body does not involve adequate knowledge of an external body.”<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, ideas summon other ideas associatively in thought patterns unique to the individual. Spinoza states: “If the human body has once been affected by two or more bodies at the same time, then when the mind subsequently imagines one of them, it will immediately recollect the others also.”<sup>36</sup> For two reasons this Spinozan associationism undermines the possibility of direct ‘realistic’ psychological representation. First, a process of mental recombination brings past perceptions to bear on present ideas, so that knowledge of an object never exists in isolation from previous subjective experience. What the mind sees, and how it is perceived, varies according to the associational habits of the viewer. Memory, defined by Spinoza as “nothing other than the certain connection of ideas involving the nature of things which are outside the human body,” intervenes in perception to condition and produce the world that the individual experiences:

And in this way each of us will pass from one thought to another, as each one’s association has ordered the images of things in the body. For example, a soldier, having seen traces of a horse in the sand, will immediately pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a horseman, and from that to the thought of war, and so on. But a farmer will pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a plow, and then to that of a field, and so on. And so each one, according as he has been accustomed to join and connect images of things in this way or that, will pass from one thought to another.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> S. H. Mallone, *The Dawn of Modern Thought: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz*. London: Oxford University Press, 1930, p. 72.

<sup>35</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 50.

<sup>36</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 46.

<sup>37</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 47.

In suggesting that existing psychological configurations influence one's perceptions, Spinoza again places a crucial emphasis on the body. Indeed, his theory of bodies supplies the second reason why, according to his psychology, a knowable object cannot be grasped simply or directly. Objects (or other bodies), described usually as unified things, are actually composites made up of smaller parts and in turn of still smaller parts (anachronistically, Spinoza could be said to endorse a version of atomism). Strictly speaking, the objective reality to which even the simplest perceptual act corresponds will be multiple and complex, an intricate "union of bodies."<sup>38</sup> In this sense, the human body is constantly being affected by "more than one object," and hence perceptual ideas will always be multiple and associational. Moreover, the human body—the site of affections—is itself a "highly composite" entity, composed of "a great many individuals of different natures," and therefore open to complex physical interactions with its environment: "The individuals composing the human body, and consequently, the human body itself, are affected by external bodies in very many ways."<sup>39</sup> This divisibility of matter affords a profusion of physical responses to an apparently simple object like a table which, when considered under the attribute of Thought, equate to a complex ideational series rather than a stable and unified image imprinted on the mind.

Thus the *Ethics* stresses the constructive role played by the mind, or more narrowly the imagination, in our grasp of the world under the attribute of Thought. Qualities usually taken as inherent or objective properties of nature, for example, can be shown to originate subjectively from physiological (one could say neurological) responses and correlative modes of thought:

For example, if the motion the nerves receive from objects presented through the eyes is conducive to health, the objects by which it is caused are called beautiful; those which cause a contrary motion are called ugly. Those which move the sense through the nose, they call pleasant-smelling or stinking;

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<sup>38</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 42.

<sup>39</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 44.

through the tongue, sweet or bitter, tasty or tasteless; those which move the ears are said to produce noise, sound, or harmony... All of these things show sufficiently that each one has judged things according to the disposition of his brain; or rather, has accepted affections of the imagination as things.<sup>40</sup>

The arresting mixture of physiological and aesthetic language here carries a crucial point: for Spinoza, there are no sharp categorical distinctions separating different regions of reality from one another, such as sophisticated or 'high' mental capacities (taste, intellect, moral reflection) from 'lower' level or simple physical operations. They are distinguished on a scale of increasing complexity, not by type. Beauty can therefore be discussed in the same breath as physiology, because for Spinoza they share a fundamentally determinate relation. Like other absolutes, the category of beauty springs from human attempts to codify the world rather than from nature itself, which is to say, it has no objectively real content outside mind and culture. Likewise, good and evil "indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, or notions we form because we compare things to one another."<sup>41</sup> Similarly, order is preferred to confusion, "as if order were anything in Nature more than a relation to our imagination."<sup>42</sup> As it resituates the categories of aesthetic, epistemological and moral value inside the circumference of psychological experience, Spinoza's deconstruction of metaphysical absolutes becomes a thoroughgoing assault on essentialism. Labels and fictions shape the world as it is seen through human eyes, and these designations have their source in inherited cultural knowledge, association, and the basic desire for self-preservation (*conatus*). Unlike Reid's neutral mirror, the mind and its perceptions must therefore be conceived as active imaginative processes: "all the notions by which ordinary people are accustomed to

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<sup>40</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 30.

<sup>41</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 115.

<sup>42</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 29.

explain Nature are only modes of imagining, and do not indicate the nature of anything, only the constitution of the imagination.”<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, according to Spinoza, language might give the impression that we possess discrete psychological powers, exercised freely by the will, but again this kind of classification has a formal rather than a literal descriptive power. His view resembles a constructivist psychological theory: “there is in the mind no absolute faculty of understanding, desiring, loving, and the like. From this it follows that these are and similar faculties are either complete fictions or nothing but metaphysical beings, or universals, which we are used to forming from particulars.”<sup>44</sup> Since minds count as examples of “finite modes,” and all finite modes are incapable of uncaused action, free will in general is also exposed as a primitive human fiction. As the psychologist David Ballin Klein has argued, this non-literal mental language has a curiously modern quality, for in contrast to the phrenologists of the early nineteenth century Spinoza does not localise specific brain functions.<sup>45</sup>

In a similar vein, the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio credits Spinoza with thinking through the question of mind and body “in ways that were not only profoundly opposed to the thinking of most of his contemporaries, but remarkably current three hundred and some years later.”<sup>46</sup> This seemingly daring claim, casting Spinoza as a “protobiologist,” intriguingly centres on the issue of perception. Like the modern neuroscientist, who understands mental images in terms of biological changes in the human organism, Spinoza doubts that a perception held in the mind resembles “a replica of the [real] object,” Damasio says. If neurobiology has shown

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<sup>43</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 30.

<sup>44</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 62.

<sup>45</sup> He argues: “Although Spinoza employed terms like ‘reason’, ‘emotion’, ‘intellect’, ‘will’, he—like the modern psychologist—warned against the error of regarding such nouns as references to distinct entities or separate faculties. Instead he regarded them as convenient verbal labels for concepts or universals obtained by abstraction from the realities of individual experience. As abstractions they have no real existence, any more than whiteness apart from white objects or circularity apart from circular objects.” David Ballin Klein quoted in William R. Uttal, *The New Phrenology: The Limits of Localizing Cognitive Processes in the Brain*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001, p. xiv.

<sup>46</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*. London: William Heineman, 2003, pp. 14.



how “the images we experience are brain constructions prompted by an object, rather than mirror reflections of the object,” then the argument of the *Ethics* looks remarkably modern.<sup>47</sup> More importantly, in tracing this previously unexamined legacy, Damasio finds that Spinoza’s thought bears a striking resemblance to the directions taken in nineteenth-century psychology:

Darkly, through the glass of unsentimental and unvarnished sentences, Spinoza had gleaned an architecture of life regulation along the lines that William James, Claude Bernard, and Sigmund Freud would pursue two centuries later. Moreover, by refusing to recognize a purposeful design in nature, and by conceiving of bodies and minds as made up of components that could be combined in varied patterns across different species, Spinoza was compatible with Charles Darwin’s evolutionary thinking.<sup>48</sup>

The nineteenth-century writers influenced by Spinoza that Damasio lists—which include Wilhelm Wundt, Herbert von Helmholtz, Ernst Haeckel, Hippolyte Taine, Johannes Müller—were all familiar to Alexander Bain and other proponents of the new mid-century psychological theory, and allusions to their work pepper Victorian psychology.<sup>49</sup> So substantial was Spinoza’s influence on these nineteenth-century French and German writers that one commentator has described him as “the founder of the independent science of psychology.”<sup>50</sup> A central figure in the prehistory of the mind sciences, even neurobiology, Spinoza can thus be seen to anticipate the directions of much later psycho-physiology.

In view of this fact, the burgeoning British interest in his work in the 1850s, 60s and 70s, amongst philosophical writers inclined like Bain towards empiricism, becomes less surprising than perhaps at first it might seem. Indeed, the rise of Spinoza should not be read as historically unconnected to more familiar aspects of

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<sup>47</sup> Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, pp. 199–200.

<sup>48</sup> Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>49</sup> Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, p. 259.

<sup>50</sup> David Bidney, *The Psychology and Ethics of Spinoza: A Study in the History and Logic of Ideas*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940, p. 373

intellectual developments in nineteenth-century culture. The empiricist writing being examined here reflects an increasingly openness to the new frameworks offered by Spinoza's philosophy, ways of thinking that returned the living body to the scene of epistemological inquiry. The implications of this return, in Bain and others, are our next concern.

### **Minds, Brains and Bodies**

Oppressive, humourless and severe, Edward Casaubon in *Middlemarch* represents a thinking mind consumed by the fantasy of disembodiment. His sober embrace of the scholarly life, which he pursues with egotistical vigour rather than selfless asceticism, is total and uncompromising. He defines himself, as do others, solely in terms of his rarefied world of ideas, as if the physical dimension of experience were irrelevant to his sense of self. In admitting to Mr Brooke that his "mind is something like the ghost of an ancient, wandering about the world," Casaubon seems as much to indulge his dream of becoming pure consciousness as apologise for his frustrating unworldliness.<sup>51</sup> Yet others, especially Dorothea, collude in the fantasy: whenever she thinks of Casaubon early in the novel it is usually just an image of his mind that she imagines (one that is "attractively labyrinthine"); and later Sir James Chettam complains, rather brusquely, that Casaubon "has got no good red blood in his body."<sup>52</sup> Casaubon's relationship with his own body, and with the physicality of life in general, is therefore a source of considerable anxiety.

The anxiety works itself out significantly within the dramatic texture of the novel, indicating Eliot's alertness to the question of embodiment. By requesting a reader to aid his research (a role taken gladly by Dorothea), for example, Casaubon manages to circumvent even the minor physical labours of scholarship. The letter he sends to her proposing marriage, which in contrast she greets with spontaneous physical expression ("she fell on her knees, buried her face, and sobbed"), almost

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<sup>51</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*. (1871-2) ed. Rosemary Ashton. London: Penguin, 1994, p. 18.

<sup>52</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 24; p. 70.

comically avoids reference to the fleshy actuality of human nature, or any tacit hint of sexual desire. So emphatically cerebral is his unromantic prose that its author, apparently repelled by sensuality, effectively silences the desiring body. When acknowledging his advanced years, for example, he turns immediately to a bookish metaphor to articulate the inexorable fact of ageing: "I can offer you... the faithful consecration of a life which, however short in the sequel, has no backward pages whereon, if you choose to turn them, you will find records such as might justly cause you either bitterness or shame."<sup>53</sup> Like the rest of the letter, the metaphor discloses Casaubon's uneasiness towards the decaying body just as it announces the tenor of his intellectual vocation. This is a man whose mind has lost any positive identification with the physiological processes affecting it, generating a sustained desire on his part to be freed from the body entirely.

The text of *Middlemarch*, however, works against this wish. Casaubon may imagine himself as all mind, but like the psychological theories emerging in the period, the novel questions his dualistic propensity to separate mind from matter. He would undoubtedly pour scorn on Alexander Bain's assertion that "the connexion of Mind and Body is not occasional or partial, but thorough-going and complete," and to this extent his grasp of the mind-body union looks relatively antiquated.<sup>54</sup> But through several narrative routes the text returns and restores the corporeal knowledge that Casaubon would repress. Firstly, considerable attention is paid to his appearance (his sunken eye sockets, his complexion of a "*cochon de lait*," or suckling pig), providing an earthy, if not comic, contrast to his classically elevated intellect. When Dorothea sees a miniature of his aunt displayed in his Lowick manor house, she notices that like him the woman has "deep grey eyes rather near together," reminding Casaubon of his inescapable genetic prehistory.<sup>55</sup> She even observes in him a likeness of John Locke, which she intends as sincere

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<sup>53</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 44.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander Bain, *Mind and Body: The Theories of their Relation*. London: Henry S. King and Co., 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1873, p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 20; p. 76.

flattery, but ironically the comparison equates Casaubon with a philosopher famous for celebrating the bodily province of the senses.

If these subtle details gently undermine his lofty self-image, then the descriptions of his failing health later in the novel stage a second and more serious return of the marginalised body. For eventually it begins to dawn on Casaubon that even he happens to be fastened to a dying animal. In consultation with Dr Lydgate, and so now an object of examination rather than in control of inquiry, he asks his physician for details of his condition, principally to establish reliably whether its implications will be fatal. "I should desire to know the truth without reservation," he instructs him. Lydgate replies, patiently but ambiguously:

'I believe you are suffering from what is called fatty degeneration of the heart, a disease which was first divined and explored by Laennec, the man who gave us the stethoscope, not so very many years ago. A good deal of experience—a more lengthened observation—is wanted on the subject. But after what you have said, it is my duty to tell you that death from this disease is often sudden. At the same time, no such result can be predicted. Your condition may be consistent with a tolerably comfortable life for another fifteen years, or even more.'<sup>56</sup>

Their exchange captures two kinds of ignorance: Casaubon's long-held ignorance of the body that has sat for years in the dusty seclusion of his library, and medical science's relative ignorance of diseased human anatomy. Lydgate, after all, brings with him a vigorously modern view of medicine (distrusted by many provincial Middlemarchers) that, despite its cutting-edge status, still cannot manage anything more decisive than an open-ended diagnosis. The ailing body will not give up its truth easily, and moreover seems to resist full interpretation. To both, though for different reasons, the body is an essentially unknown but crucial region. The real importance of the scene, however, concerns Casaubon rather than Lydgate. Here is

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<sup>56</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 423.

a man brutally reminded that a life lived in and through the mind is rooted in blood and tissue like any other, and, moreover, that these now defective processes cannot truly be fathomed. As it follows his demand for knowledge (“the truth without reservation”), the scene dramatises the body’s refusal to submit to rational mastery in the way that Casaubon, perhaps rather desperately, assumes it must.

A third example of how Eliot’s novel undermines the fantasy of mental autonomy occurs in chapter 20, the same chapter that features Casaubon’s esoteric letter to Dorothea. Like most chapters in *Middlemarch*, the fictional narrative is stalled and supplemented here by an epigraph, a common device for Eliot which performs in this instance (as so often in her novels) as an ironic commentary on the primary narrative. Neither fully inside the fictional frame nor wholly extratextual, this secondary or supplementary discourse runs against the grain of the first (one whose fabric is already richly heterogeneous, in that it incorporates a letter—an additional text—written by one its characters). The epigraph is taken from Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), an encyclopaedic account of “morbid psychology” and its attendant physical symptoms, still regarded by some Victorians as a seminal piece of scientific literature, despite being a densely intertextual assimilation of medical, astrological and magical sources.<sup>57</sup> It catalogues the gruesome ailments caused by excessive sedentary behaviour, or “over-much sitting” as Burton calls it: “gowts, catarrhs, rheums, cachexia, bradypepsia, bad eyes, stone, and collick, crudities, oppilations, vertigo, winds, consumptions.”<sup>58</sup> If ever there was a man likely to suffer from these unpleasant effects of sedentariness then surely it is Casaubon. For a deskbound bibliophile like him, falling prey to these symptoms would be an acute professional hazard, the bodily cost of a life spent in relative inertia. So this grisly compendium of disease, articulated literally from the margins of the text, acts a counterweight to his persistent discourse of the mind

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. (1621) (2 vols) eds. Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kiessling and Rhonda H. Blair. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989-90.

<sup>58</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 43.

and the disembodied intellect. Almost like a repository of the knowledge Casaubon has denied, the epigraph interrupts the mentalist vision he espouses by giving voice to the silenced physical body. It is, as it were, that body speaking back, with a nasty if comical reminder of the proximity of our souls and arseholes.<sup>59</sup>

Unlike Casaubon, Spinoza envisaged a philosophically tenable means of reintegrating the divided Cartesian regimes. As one philosopher has put it, he evolved an argument in favour of the “intrinsic belonging-together of mind and matter, which gave causal preference neither to matter, as materialism would have it, nor to mind, as idealism would have it, but instead stressed their interrelation on the common ground of which they were both dependent aspects.”<sup>60</sup> Mid-Victorian psychology, also recognising this mind-body interdependence, increasingly turned its analyses towards the body, which as the first chapter showed had generally been absent in eighteenth-century discussions of the mind. Bain, in particular, sought to marry the established psychological language of associationism with a systematic knowledge of physiology, an approach that came to characterise the new psychological theory. Writing to John Stuart Mill in 1851, while preparing *The Senses and the Intellect*, Bain said he was “satisfied that if I had that familiar and perfect grasp that belongs to the professional Anatomist, I might do a vast more in the way of pushing forward my own subject.”<sup>61</sup> Herbert Spencer broadly agreed with this aspiration, and the psychological arguments in his work protest strongly against the spiritualist orthodoxy that “the body is merely the ghost’s house, having no causal relation to it.” Instead, he recognised their profound interdependence: “Mind is not as deep as the brain only, but is, in a sense, as deep as the viscera.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> This memorable phrase is borrowed from Simon Critchley, who coins it in a discussion of mind and body in the philosophy of humour, though it applies nicely here, too: “the bodily dimension of the comic takes place in the gap between being and having, between our souls and arseholes... We cannot simultaneously *be* what we *have*.” Simon Critchley, *On Humour*. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 50.

<sup>60</sup> Hans Jonas, “Spinoza and the Theory of Organism” in Stuart F. Spicker, ed. *The Philosophy of the Body: Rejections of Cartesian Dualism*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970, p. 61.

<sup>61</sup> Bain quoted in Robert M. Young, *Mind, Brain and Adaptation in the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 103.

<sup>62</sup> Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography*. (2 vols) London: Williams and Northgate, 1904, II, p. 417; p. 421.



These were, however, controversial and challenging views capable of upsetting conservative and religious sensibilities, as well as informed specialist opinion. One such critic, John Grote, who held the chair of moral philosophy at Cambridge University from 1855 to 1866, eyed Bain's physiological descriptions with suspicion, as he informed him in a noteworthy letter of 1859:

You have apparently a knowledge of physiology greater than most of your predecessors, and the want of which knowledge has made me (for my own humble part) hesitate in following out some trains of thought which have suggested themselves... I cannot conceive that the utmost refinement of analysis of the corporeal phenomenon of emotion will carry us beyond the region of *organs* or instruments, and *the self* which uses them must be something which has its realities, over and above what belongs to *them*.<sup>63</sup>

Bain would not have been greatly surprised by this kind of reaction to his work. Grote's criticism (directed against *The Emotions and the Will* but applicable across Bain's thinking in general) crystallises an older style of psychological argument—one often vehemently resistant to biologically centred theories—that continued to exert considerable influence in the middle of the nineteenth century. Its thrust is plain: no matter how detailed our anatomical vocabulary becomes, or how accurately the organs and nerves are understood, physiology will only ever yield knowledge of a physiological kind; the identity of the self, on the other hand, belongs to a different order of description and cannot be discovered or explained within these structures. As Grote frames it, the argument cleverly utilises a spatial rhetoric to suggest the remoteness of the self from physical processes (it assumes a "region" somewhere "beyond" the mere body), and to imply a causal hierarchy between them (the self exists "over and above" all else). This kind of language also appears in Eliot's novels, spoken by characters and narrators who share Grote's psychological assumptions or who epitomise wisdom derived from common sense.

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<sup>63</sup> Alexander Bain, *Autobiography*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1904, pp. 255-6.

An example of it occurs in chapter 13 of *Daniel Deronda*, when Gwendolen's long private reflection on her suitor Grandcourt is broken suddenly by the intrusion of her mother's voice: "Gwendolen looked round, and seeming to be roused to the consciousness of her physical self, took off her gloves and then her hat, that the soft breeze might blow on her head."<sup>64</sup> However fleetingly, there is a moment here when Gwendolen implicitly figures the body as a secondary substance appended to her real mental self, as if an essentially passive exteriority. Needless to say, she is no Casaubon, not least because she lacks the seriousness or discipline to plough through books and doggedly pursue ideas, but like him Gwendolen reaches for a kind of self-mastery (in the form of egotistical refashioning) that takes for granted an inner/outer dualism. It expresses itself in the aloofness that they both display—from others, from social life, even from their own embodiment.

In a similar way, one narrator in *Middlemarch* (an unusual figure who urges the reader to sympathise with Casaubon's arid personality) clings to the sort of psychological descriptions that Grote would have recognised: "Mr Casaubon had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungered like the rest of us."<sup>65</sup> Here, again, a spatial metaphor cordons off the self as an irreducible and inviolable category, and the narrator evidently assumes that this view is a natural and inevitable one to hold. The recurrence of this kind of language in Eliot's novels dramatises a style of thought that still held sway in the mid-Victorian era, but its appeal to common sense is undermined elsewhere by her utilisation of very different—and more Bainian—metaphors. A later narrator in *Middlemarch*, for instance, aspires to a grasp of neurobiology: "I am not sure that certain fibres in Mr Garth's mind had not resumed their old vibration towards the very end which now revealed itself to Fred."<sup>66</sup> Like Grote, the earlier narrator would have recoiled from such physicalist descriptions of human will and behaviour.

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<sup>64</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*. (1876) ed. Terence Cave. London: Penguin, 1995, p. 138.

<sup>65</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 278.

<sup>66</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 561.

Bain's key works, however, *The Senses and the Intellect* and *The Emotions and the Will*, both argue (by almost taking it for granted) that mind and body are continuously connected. This continuity and relational interdependence form a crucial aspect of his project. It is at once the radical point on which both books turn (and on which their intellectual originality depends), and yet a commitment that neither of them vociferously or iconoclastically declaims. Bain's radicalism takes place quietly. In them, he seeks to develop a detailed analysis of the mind *through* the body. The trajectory traced over both volumes, moving from physio-sensory structures and stimuli to advanced cognitive states, is highly significant: one can proceed to the latter only through the former. This basic principle or movement gives the narrative of *The Senses and the Intellect* and *The Emotions and the Will* its shape. The reader has to move through some three hundred pages discussing the nervous system, cerebrum, muscles and organic processes of sensation before reaching the psychological aspects of the sensory mechanism, eventually arriving near the end of the second volume at the stratum encompassing volition, consciousness and moral belief. It is in the nature of this narrative journey that the reader cannot easily forget the bodily origins of the unfolding psychological story. The point continually enforced by the formal design of Bain's work is not just that a single continuous plane joins mental with physical phenomenon, but that the whole emerging picture of development depends on rudimentary material events.

For a Victorian culture hypersensitive to distinctions between the primitive and the civilised, this was indeed a radical mode of analysis. Collectively, Bain's two major works daringly confront long-held dualisms central to the Western philosophical tradition, not least the assumption that subjectivity and identity are to be conceived in opposition to material embodiment. But, in contrast with, say, John Ruskin, whose purpose in *Modern Painters* is similarly designed to trouble settled categories and values, Bain does not openly announce the way he will contest tradition. The tone of his writing aspires to an evenness and modesty quite

different from the variegated texture of Ruskin's work, with all its provocations and its conscious air of controversy. As radical as they are in some respects, neither *The Senses and the Intellect* nor *The Emotions and the Will* take rhetorical strides to challenge and provoke the reader by sounding a rallying cry against dualism, nor even appear at first glance especially controversial. In fact, the reverse obtains; they appear unflappably sturdy works, carrying out their analytical survey of the subject with thoroughness and care, and with little Ruskinian exuberance. By no means do they seem eager to court controversy. One practical reason for this is that Bain was aware, as ever, of the likely charges of materialism and godlessness that went with the territory. Opponents of psycho-physiology (even respectful and alert ones like John Grote or James Martineau) did not need extra encouragement—the interface of mind and matter was already a controversial enough question.

But another reason for it is that the narrative structure of Bain's two works, and their aesthetic of continuity, corresponds to the empiricism on which his whole psychological approach is founded. The unhurried unfolding of the subsections, chapters and divisions, and the steady progress they make through the various aspects of the motor-sensory, emotional, intellectual and volitional organisation, suggest something of the way that modern empiricists like Bain understood the mind to develop over time. It captures in a structural sense the principle driving the incremental development of the mental landscape in each individual, mirroring the idea of internal structural expansion. Just as the form of Bain's narratives expands slowly and steadily, repeatedly modified by the addition of short incremental sections rather than sudden adjustments or ruptures, so the mind is gradually built up into a continuous and complex mature structure. One of the key principles conveyed formally by, for example, *The Senses and the Intellect*, the first of the two volumes, is the primacy of the very idea of structure itself, and not just in a narrowly psychological sense of taxonomical correctness. Its orderly, piecemeal way of constructing its picture of the mind discloses a more general fascination

with structuring activity *per se*, with how organisational and systemic laws regulate change within a structural entity, and with the shifting internal relationships comprising their slow formation.

So the narrative of *The Senses and the Intellect* describes an accumulative movement from simplicity into complexity. It opens with virtually the most general definition of the mind possible (Bain merely opposes it to the external world, in a sweeping two-fold division of all phenomena into subject or object) and then, as the narrative ranges page by page across different zones of the sentient organisation, the definition narrows and tightens, gathering refinement and increasing structural depth.<sup>67</sup> It begins by describing basic muscular feelings, progressing to sensations of hunger, respiration and fatigue, to the operation of the five senses, including the perceptual apparatuses, to appetites and instincts, and finally to laws regulating intellectual association, aesthetic feelings, reasoning, memory and abstract or logical ideas. The most sophisticated and compound of these, Bain argues, can be found exemplified in works of scientific and imaginative literature. This long and progressive narrative sweep thus begins from a rudimentary recognition of a link between mind and brain, and culminates with a consideration of creativity and a differentiation between various modes of imaginative achievement (such as those of the poet, the sculptor, the architect) including, too, “the emotions of harmony, beauty, sublimity.”<sup>68</sup> In between, the narrative examines diverse intermediate subjects from locomotive energy to human selfishness; from active reflexes, like coughing and sneezing, to the acquisition and deployment of language. At over six hundred pages long, it amounts to an exhaustive, multi-tiered survey.

At stake is more than the sheer prospect of aggregative detail. Certainly, the mass of detail in itself manages at some level to convey a thoroughly secular celebration of the human mind, in all its manifest variety, subtlety and vastness. To

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<sup>67</sup> “The Internal, or Subject, World is our experience of everything not extended... Thus Mind is defined, in the first instance, by the method of contrast, or as a remainder arising from subtracting the External World from the totality of existence.” Bain, *Senses and the Intellect*, p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> Bain, *Senses and the Intellect*, p. 621.

this extent, perhaps, *The Senses and the Intellect* and *The Emotions and the Will* both humanistically venerate the psychological spectacle they describe. But they do not just relentlessly parade raw factual minutiae, whereby density of information becomes valued for its own sake. More importantly, the narrative strategy of *The Senses and the Intellect* focuses attention on the collective structure formed by the accretion of detail, on the system of relationships it comprises. The tendency of the narrative is to connect, or to imply connection; that is, the complexity into which it moves results from, not just exhaustive detail alone, but increasing connectivity amongst its constantly expanding parts and unfolding principles. These adjust into wider groupings and sets of interrelated phenomena. The narrative, like the mind, implies a kind of generative power, producing new relational categories and classes as effects of its development. As the sections and divisions proliferate, so does the sense of their relative position within the hierarchy of a larger scheme, and their functional dependency upon it. And they proliferate from an initial division of the mind into three properties: its capacity to feel; its ability to act, or exert power; and its cognitive facility, meaning primarily its awareness of difference and similarity, and its retentive capability.<sup>69</sup> All other subjective phenomena branch outwards, relationally, from this primary structure. Emergent complexity is thus a dominant theme, and Bain's writing has an acute self-consciousness about the elaborate classificatory structure being slowly erected.

He recognises, for example, that this tendency inclines *The Senses the Intellect* towards what he deems the "primitive endowments of our mental constitution," and he strives constantly to justify the branching logic of the subsets, such as the way it positions the appetites and instincts in "the inferior region of mind," which broke with the tradition of Scottish philosophy.<sup>70</sup> But at the same time he is concerned not to isolate the intellect from these lower strata: "Although we can hardly ever be said to exert this portion of our mental system [i.e. the

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<sup>69</sup> Bain, *Senses and the Intellect*, pp. 2-6.

<sup>70</sup> Bain, *Senses and the Intellect*, p. xiii; p. 69.



intellect] from the other elements, namely, Feeling and Volition, yet scientific method requires it to be described apart.”<sup>71</sup> This point is crucial. Bain is aware of the limits of descriptive language, in such a way that registers the artifice of his categories. Out of methodological necessity, the narrative separates the domain of the intellect from that of the senses, but in reality these levels of phenomena are implied everywhere together in one integrated system. *The Senses and the Intellect* tries to convey the unified plane of the sentient organism’s existence, but Bain acknowledges how in the end it remains impossible to represent that continuum adequately, for it is in the nature of language and narrative to impose misleading distinctions upon it. Analysis imposes inevitably artificial boundaries. All mental activity inevitably has a corresponding bodily manifestation, expressed as some kind of change in physical processes, yet the later sections of the text dealing with phenomena like moral judgment do not trace these correspondences precisely or fully—quite literally, they are not fleshed out. But the message of the first volume is that the intellect depends constitutionally on the activity of the senses, even though the narrative arbitrarily divides them. As G. H. Lewes argued: “What on the physiological side is simply a neural process, is on the psychological side a sentient process.”<sup>72</sup>

Bain’s work essentially sympathises with Lewes’s view, which already hints at a Spinozan conception of mind and body. But a broader point to note first is that Bain’s empiricism entails a sceptical view of language. Our ordinary language, he argues, makes distinctions between specific mental operations and powers, such as desire, memory, will, imagination, and so on; but, he reminds us, these are no more than abstractions formed in language over time, conversions of real experience into general conceptions. However familiar they seem, however intuitively real, these labels do not actually denote truly separate faculties (as literalised, for example, by

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<sup>71</sup> Bain, *Senses and the Intellect*, p. 325.

<sup>72</sup> G. H. Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, *The Foundations of a Creed*. (2 vols) London: Trübner and Co., 1874, I, p. 135.

the phrenologists' idea of faculties physically distributed across the cranium). It is rather the continual deployment of this language that creates this assumption. The mind, then, does not really function in the way that psychological language seems to suggest it does. Thomas Reid, and other common sense realists, we recall, had argued precisely the opposite point in the eighteenth century. Language, Reid said, provided evidence to contradict Hume's apparently passive theory of ideas, for its grammatical structure confirmed the existence of a purposive self equipped with active mental powers. Bain's work, however, remains suspicious of language (rather like Hume himself, in fact), doubting that linguistic structure necessarily tells us anything directly about the structure of reality or the functioning of our minds. He certainly does not assume a mirror-like symmetry between the two. Whereas Reid used language as proof of an essentially static faculty psychology, Bain's distrust of its referentiality allows him the space in which to develop a constructivist and anti-innatist theory. Like Spinoza, who argues in the *Ethics* that "there is in the mind no absolute faculty of understanding, desiring, loving, and the like," Bain consistently repudiates the idea of fixed and intrinsic psychological functions.<sup>73</sup>

Instead, the mind is characteristically assimilative, aggregating, compound, and constantly in process. The application of associationist principles in both *The Senses and the Intellect* and *The Emotions and the Will* ensures that contingency and historicity play central roles in Bain's understanding of mental organisation. As suggested by the massive sections on the laws of association, much emphasis falls on the mind's transformational and adaptive features. At the opening of the section on 'Movement, Sense and Intellect', for example, Bain notes self-consciously: "In the complete system of the mind the Intellect is thus placed midway between the instinctive and the cultivated emotions and activities, being itself the instrument for converting the one class into the other."<sup>74</sup> The mind thus builds itself out of its experiences. There are no sharp boundaries, sudden divisions or breaks in the

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<sup>73</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 62.

<sup>74</sup> Bain, *Senses and the Intellect*, p. 70.

structure. And this is a principle foregrounded, as we have said, by the works' formal design, specifically by their incorporative and assimilative aesthetic. The adhesive nature of mental association translates into a property of narrative.

But what sort of a text does this make, say, *The Senses and the Intellect*? To our twenty-first century eyes it may seem, perhaps, both familiar and unusual: familiar, because in some rather striking ways it resembles a modern psychological textbook, especially regarding layout and design (testimony to Bain's influence on the later development of psychology as a professional discipline). Yet it seems unusual, too, because its concerns exceed the boundaries of a single disciplinary subject as now understood. Indeed, one has real difficulties trying to determine its identity or genre. Part student manual, part philosophical treatise, part overview of physiology, its unusual status derives from a strikingly assimilative discursive texture. It is a text of mixed genre, a hybrid narrative. The most random glance through its pages reveals a concern with an extraordinary variety of subjects: the workings of the larynx; the feeling of disgust; the training of army recruits; Alison's theory of beauty; book-keeping and industry; our belief in a material world; the acquisition of speech in children; history and narrative. The list could go on, with continuing eclecticism. Yet, despite this variety of languages and kinds of writing, there are no abrupt separations in the diverse texture of the narrative. One part adjoins another, adhesively and associatively, very much in the same fashion as psychological ideas themselves (according to Bain's characterisation of the mind). The very spaciousness of its form means that *The Senses and the Intellect* thematises diversification, abundance and integration, all key aspects of Bain's theory. His text's hybridity reinforces the idea of internal continuity within different regions and strata of the mind-body system.

Here the influence of a Spinozan way of addressing the mind/body question begins to become apparent. Although he does not expressly tackle the issue, nor even mention Spinoza directly, the sustained critique of dualism in Bain's writing

effectively commits him to a monistic reunion of matter and thought. Just as there are no absolute demarcations within the overall psychological organisation between the mind's different functions, so there is not a radical discontinuity between mind and body. Instead, his theory implies some version of monism, although the precise ground or nature of this undivided substance is not carefully specified. What is important, however, is his view (again, consistently enforced throughout his work) that 'mind' and 'body' have to be understood merely as two alternative ways of describing one set of phenomena. They are its twin, relational aspects, not separate realms or categories of event. They indicate different modes in which we can talk about changes taking place in the human organism, one a psychical language and the other physical. Furthermore, this approach to the question coincides closely with a view of the mind-body complex as the site of constantly converging energy and rapid change. And for Bain, as for Lewes and Spencer, nowhere is this complex dynamism more crucially evident than in the functioning of the central nervous system, their treatment of which exemplifies this Spinozan double aspect theory.

### **Nerves and Networks**

As we have seen already, talk of the nerves and nervous energy appears in Victorian fiction as well as in the non-fictional prose of writers like Bain. Its insinuation into the language of character psychology in *Middlemarch*—the “certain fibres in Mr Garth’s mind” seeming to resume “their old vibration,” for example—suggests the growing shift in the culture towards a distinctively modern theory of the nervous mind and body associated in the mid-nineteenth century with empiricist writers like Bain.<sup>75</sup> But as Eliot’s narrator’s awkward syntax and double negatives suggest, the precise nature, function and organisation of the nervous system were not confidently known or agreed upon, even if for Bain (and also Spencer and Lewes)

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<sup>75</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 561.

there was no doubting the centrality of nervous energy to psychology and to the notion of individual subjectivity. Lengthy accounts of the nervous system appear prominently in the work of all three. In *The Senses and the Intellect* a preliminary chapter on the nerves and nerve centres establishes its “intimate” connection to mental processes.<sup>76</sup> A similar discussion opens Spencer’s *Principles of Psychology*, though its consideration of nervous tissue and brain-size ranges across a variety of animal species, establishing its wider evolutionary purpose. Within this framework, Spencer shares with Bain the belief that “true conclusions respecting psychical phenomena must be based on the facts exhibited throughout organic nature.”<sup>77</sup> Lewes, too, gives an outline of the nervous system in *The Physiology of Common Life*, where he generalises that “the Brain is the most important organ in a complex apparatus of organs—the Nervous System; and this Nervous System has one general property—Consciousness.” The activity of the nerves, he says, even participates in the production of personal identity: “Every excitement of a nerve-centre produces a sensation; the sum total of such excitements forms the general Consciousness, or sense of existence.”<sup>78</sup> To this extent, he argues, the self can be regarded as commensurate with its nervous structure.

This rather schematic account of nervous activity is developed in his later multi-volumed work, *The Problems of Life and Mind* (1874-9), into a less dogmatic assertion of correspondences between nerves and upper-level psychic phenomena. The mature Lewes avoids making such bold leaps from tissue to consciousness, deflecting potential accusations of materialism by remaining sceptical that the mass of nerve pathways can ever really be known. He cites, for example, the vast configuration of fibres in the human brain as an illustration of its daunting

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<sup>76</sup> Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect*, p. 11.

<sup>77</sup> Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*. (2 vols) London: Williams and Norgate, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1870, I, p. 13.

<sup>78</sup> G. H. Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life*. (2 vols) Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1859-60, II, p. 6; p. 65.

unknowability.<sup>79</sup> Exactly how these fibres (and the nerve centres to which they connect) lead eventually to the production of sentience, intelligence, will, and so on, he argues, remains unknown and perhaps may never be fully explained. Careful not to endorse an idealist view of the mind as mysterious and 'other', Lewes treads a subtle path between a theory of mental autonomy and its dread opposite, materialism, which would explain mind literally through neural mechanics. "We must learn more of the processes of Sensation, Thought, and Volition," he finally grants, "before we can unravel the complex physiological web on which they depend."<sup>80</sup> The mind, including our intuition of selfhood, however, is bound up deeply, perhaps even causally, with the physical processes of nerve force.

For Bain, too, consciousness cannot easily be translated into patterns of nerve energy, but even the most sophisticated mental faculties are aspects of an integrated organic life, structured and sustained by its central nervous system. His works scrutinise the nervous system so minutely because it is the place where the mind/body question becomes supremely focused; it represents the problematic interface of psychic and physical realities. And in his account the nervous system is described as a network exhibiting incessant and innumerable change. "The function of a nerve," he argues, "is to transmit impressions, influences, or stimuli, from one part of the system to another."<sup>81</sup> Together the nerves form a continuous system of transmitters and conduction, linking the brain to the spinal cord and to the various regions and extremities of the body. The essential property of the system is therefore motion, and hence Bain's description of it only begins to hint at its sheer structural complexity. Here he is attempting to capture a snapshot of the nerve architecture inferable from a single sense impression:

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<sup>79</sup> G. H. Lewes, *The Problems of Life and Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, *The Physical Basis of Mind*. London: Trübner and Co., 1877, p. 148.

<sup>80</sup> Lewes, *The Problems of Life and Mind*, p. 159.

<sup>81</sup> Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect*, p. 39.



An impression of sound, a musical note, for example, is carried to the brain; the result is a responsive action and excitement extending to the voice, mouth, eyes, head, &c. This multiplex and various manifestation implies a system of connexion among the centres of action, whereby many strings can be touched from one point; a connexion due to the conducting nerves that pass and repass from centre to centre, and from the centres to the muscular apparatus over the body. Supposing the corpora quadrigemina to be a centre for the sense of vision, an impression passing to this centre propagates a movement towards many other centres,—to the convoluted hemispheres upwards, to the cerebellum behind, and to the medulla oblongata and spinal cord beneath; and through these various connexions an extensive wave of effects may be produced, ending in a complicated chain of movements all over the framework of the body. Such a system of intercommunication and transmission of power is therefore an essential part of the bodily and mental structure.<sup>82</sup>

The furious nerve action being described in this passage constantly exceeds Bain's language. His long, sinewy sentences suggest multiple movements and reactions, collisions and excitements, connections and transformations, whose systemic effects seem to carry on far beyond the author's lens. It is an evocative picture of an interactive and highly energised network. It is also a deliberately metaphorical one; Bain invokes strings, chains and waves to visualise the proliferating process of energy distribution, and these metaphors create an impressionistic effect rather than a realistic or transcriptional one. That is, the sense of the passage is carried more by suggestive images than by his deployment of technical vocabulary. Above all, perhaps, it incites the reader to mentally visualise a literally unwitnessable and invisible bodily event, and in that very gesture Bain both marks an epistemological boundary and tries imaginatively to surpass it. The phrase "the transmission of power" captures this dominant theme of the passage: language, in testifying to the forceful and pervasive transmission of energy, must inevitably remain inadequate to the task of describing it.

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<sup>82</sup> Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect*, p. 62.

Lewes uses similarly suggestive language in his own account of the nervous system. He argues, for example: "There is an incessant action and interaction of the various parts of the sensitive mechanism: sensations cross and recross, exciting and modifying each other, and the sum total is a feeling of existence."<sup>83</sup> Again, the movements described defy precise specification, and his language engages solely an imaginative type of understanding. In Spencer's account, too, the nervous system is constantly being "traversed by waves of molecular change," in turn releasing "secondary waves" throughout the entire structure.<sup>84</sup> The meaning of such remarks lies in their building verbal effects, not their literal accuracy; indeed, a key part of their effect is to suggest the impenetrable and veiled complexity of the nervous substance itself. The common idea carried by all of these metaphors, though, is that sensation takes place in and through a system with two distinct properties: structural continuity and constant animation. A local change in one region of the system (the sensitive fibres in the foot, say) will cause a transfer of nerve energy, not only towards the brain, but across the totality of interconnected pathways and centres distributed around the body. No part of the whole system, of necessity, will remain static or unmodified. Bain, drawing on the latest physiological knowledge, explains the system by using the strikingly Victorian analogy of a railway network: the nerves, like telegraph wires running parallel with the tracks, connect all the centres or stations with one another, if only indirectly via branch lines.<sup>85</sup> Thus the links connecting the cerebrum to a centre lower down the cerebrospinal axis can be likened to the mass of wires linking London and Liverpool. In this respect, the extended structural metaphor stresses activity and interconnection.

Lewes utilises a similar visualisation of the anatomical body as the national body as a way of describing the nerves, though his analogy is more agrarian than industrial: "each sensation and each motion really represents a change in the whole

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<sup>83</sup> Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life*, p. 73.

<sup>84</sup> Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*, I, p. 96.

<sup>85</sup> Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect*, pp. 31-2.

organism", he says, just as a bad harvest affects the whole nation.<sup>86</sup> The different choice of simile is illuminating. Lewes objects to Bain's popular railway analogy, precisely because it stresses, too simplistically, the mechanical aspects of the nervous system. It is, he says, an "old image" of nerves as passive conductors of an electrical current, and so he dismisses it with exasperated sarcasm: "The sensory nerve 'transmits an impression to the brain'—as the wire transmits a message to the [telegraphic] bureau. The motor nerve, in turn, 'transmits the mandates of the will'—and all is clear!"<sup>87</sup> Needless to say, it was not at all clear, and an important feature of arguments surrounding the nervous system is precisely the way they foreground the appropriateness of language and symbol. Bain, Lewes and Spencer all see it as comprehensible only by analogy, even if their analogies are different and contradictory. While Bain acknowledges the value of comparing nerve force to electrical conduction and to magnetism, these are not literal claims, as he emphasises unequivocally in *The Senses and the Intellect*.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Lewes objects to the voltaic comparison ("Nothing can be more unlike the conduction of an electric current than this excitation of Neurility"), but not on that the grounds that it is a factual error in Bain's account. Rather, it seems to him a misleading and unhelpful analogy.<sup>89</sup> Throughout his work, Lewes tirelessly alerts the reader to the artifice of the physiologist's language:

Although it is now common to speak of nerves as transmitting waves of molecular motion, and to regard nerves as the passive medium for the 'transference of force', whereby the force is thus made an abstract entity, we must always remember that such phrases are metaphors, and that the truer expression will not be 'transference of force', but the 'propagation of excitation'.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Lewes, *The Problems of Life and Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, p. 284.

<sup>87</sup> Lewes, *The Problems of Life and Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, p. 179.

<sup>88</sup> Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect*, p. 63.

<sup>89</sup> Lewes, *The Problems of Life and Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, pp. 182-3.

<sup>90</sup> Lewes, *The Problems of Life and Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, p. 176.

His 'Excitation' may be the truer expression, but like 'Nerve Force' it too remains a "convenient symbol" in the physiologist's repertoire rather than a literal reality.<sup>91</sup> Lewes cautions the reader insistently on this point. Self-consciousness regarding the provisionality of scientific description is vitally important in Lewes, as it is for all of these empiricists. As Spencer sympathetically remarks: "our only course is constantly to recognize our symbols as symbols only."<sup>92</sup>

Moreover, Bain views the relationship between the physical aspects of the nervous system and its corresponding psychological side in terms of relative symbolisation. Since the two aspects share the same dynamic structure, a similar language is used to describe both the circulation of nervous impulses and the sentient feelings present to consciousness. They mutually symbolise one another, as it were, representing the two equivalent sides of the mind-body system. Thus an incessant flow of nervous energy becomes, at a psychological level, an incessant flow of mental energy. Bain makes the point lucidly: "when the mind is in the exercise of its functions, the physical accompaniment is the passing and re-passing of innumerable streams of nervous influence. Whether under a sensation of something actual, or under an emotion or an idea, or a train of ideas, the general operation is still the same. It seems as if we might say, no currents, no mind. The transmission of influence along the nerve fibres from place to place, seems the very essence of cerebral action."<sup>93</sup> In other words, rapid neural change, considered either physically or mentally, constantly traverses the sentient organism, and its mental and material aspects are, to borrow a phrase from Lewes, "both simply embodiments of Experience."<sup>94</sup>

The ability to discriminate between two different impressions, for example, which Bain considers to be the mind's most rudimentary act, creates what he calls a "cerebral shock" across the nerves: "The change from an existing, to a new

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<sup>91</sup> Lewes, *The Problems of Life and Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, p. 169.

<sup>92</sup> Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*, I, p. 162.

<sup>93</sup> Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect*, pp. 65-6.

<sup>94</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, p. 333.

condition of the mind may not be very great, but if great enough to be felt at all, and to leave a mark behind it, a certain impetus or shock must cause a thrill through the cerebral system.”<sup>95</sup> Thus the entire nervous system exists in a state of continual re-excitement, tension and flux. As Peter Logan has persuasively argued, a distinctly new conception of the nerves emerged during the mid-Victorian period, and Bain’s description here accords closely with it. As Logan explains, earlier physiological commentaries on the nerves tended to identify the brain (or sensorium) as a kind of central authority in the body, where the nerves were understood as merely a fibrous mechanism for relaying sensory input, or “simple pathways for sensations entering the brain and motor impulses flowing to the muscles.” This changed in the first half of the nineteenth century, mainly due to developments in medical research, so that by the 1840s the hierarchical and centralised structure “yielded to a new structure of dispersed authority.”<sup>96</sup> A greater role was accorded to nerves and nervous centres, in such a way that the sensorium ceased to have its former unifying function. Instead, these ganglia (in the spinal cord, for example) acquired degrees of regional autonomy, and the brain itself began to be characterised as a divisible rather than unified entity.

An effect of this mid-century shift was to reposition the brain’s relationship with the mind. As we saw in chapter one, phrenology had proceeded from the claim that the brain is the organ of the mind. The newer theory, including Bain’s version of it, wholly challenged that model of localisation. In *The Emotions and the Will* he insists that the mind has to be explained with reference to its *systemic* counterparts in the nervous body. The occurrence of a single feeling, for example, implies the activation of the whole: “no feeling, however tranquil, is possible without a full participation of the physical system.”<sup>97</sup> He specifically introduces a concept of

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<sup>95</sup> Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*. (1859) London: Longmans, Green and Co., 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1865, p. 572.

<sup>96</sup> Peter Melville Logan, *Nerves and Narratives: A Cultural History of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century British Prose*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p. 166.

<sup>97</sup> Bain, *Emotions and the Will*, p. 5.

‘diffusion’ at the beginning of *The Emotions and the Will* to indicate the process by which energy is constantly distributed across the organism, applicable to both its mental and physical realms: “the aroused currents *diffuse* themselves freely over the brain, leading to a general agitation of the moving organs, as well as affecting the viscera.”<sup>98</sup> The wave of effects ripples across the network, colliding with other patterns of neural discharge and tremor (Lewes likens this movement to the diffusion of actual waves across the surface of a lake, reaching the shore and then rebounding back towards the centre). Consequently, all parts of the nervous system affect every other part; there can be no truly localised or isolated activity in one particular bodily region. Lewes, too, makes this point: “An isolated excitation is impossible in a continuous nervous tissue; an isolated feeling is impossible in the consensus or unity of the sentient organism.”<sup>99</sup> In this sense, the whole body, not the mere brain, can be said to constitute the organ or seat of the mind.<sup>100</sup>

Bain draws upon the same network model of energy diffusion in order to attack mind/body dualism, too. His double-aspect theory and his Spinozan prioritisation of the body dispel any lingering transcendentalism from his theory of mind. He wholly rejects the possibility of conscious life divorced from matter, or what Lewes calls “a soul, a spirit, an archaeus, a vital principle, a vital force, a *nisus formativus*, a plan or divine idea”:<sup>101</sup>

If it so please us, we are at liberty to say that mind is a source of power; but we must then mean by mind, the consciousness in conjunction with the whole body; and we also be prepared to admit, that the physical energy is the indispensable condition, and consciousness the casual... In a word, mind, as known to us in our own constitution, is the very last thing that we should set

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<sup>98</sup> Bain, *Emotions and the Will*, p. 3.

<sup>99</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, p. 366.

<sup>100</sup> Lewes, once again, is more explicit on this point than Bain: “It is, however, one thing to recognise the Cerebrum as having an important part in the production of psychical phenomena, another thing to localise all the phenomena in it as their organ and seat.” Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, p. 163.

<sup>101</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, p. 22.



up as an independent power, swaying and sustaining the powers of the natural world.<sup>102</sup>

Two related ideas emerge here: first, once again, the mind-body complex appears ceaselessly active, and also *activating* in the sense of expending energy and initiating action upon its objects; and second, rather than deriving from some external or transcendental source, this power is entirely contained inside the structures of the system. Where empiricism's theory of mind had traditionally been open to the charge of passivity, Bain's psychophysiology anticipates that criticism by grounding its claims in mental action. Spencer's theory also shares this prevailing emphasis. In the *Principles of Psychology* he writes, echoing Bain: "Knowing implies something acted upon and something acting upon it."<sup>103</sup> Again, his theorisation of this power does not rely on invoking an extrinsic influence; it arises with the new mid-Victorian concept of the continuous energy network.

Close parallels in George Eliot's work helpfully illuminate the idea. She frequently shows how memory, and its spectrum of associated emotional cadences, manifests itself in the whole fabric of the body, especially in material expressions such as shocks and shudders. We find it in *Middlemarch*, for example, at an important crux of plot late in the novel: "With memory set smarting like a reopened wound, a man's past is not simply a dead history, an outworn preparation of the present: it is not a repented error shaken loose from life: it is a still quivering part of himself, bringing shudders and bitter flavours and the tinglings of a merited shame."<sup>104</sup> A man's past, in other words, is written into the composition of his flesh, as the body carries its historical identity in cells, organs and nervous pathways. Our bodies, in other words, are active repositories of knowledge. If anything, Eliot's fictional treatment of the idea enforces Bain's argument more vividly than Bain himself, blending as it does the different orders of language which correspond to

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<sup>102</sup> Bain, *Emotions and the Will*, pp. 436-37.

<sup>103</sup> Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*, I, p. 147.

<sup>104</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 615.

Spinoza's twin modes of thought and matter. The "tinglings of a merited shame," for instance, a phrase which brilliantly captures Bulstrode's arresting fear of embarrassment and scandal as the past comes knocking on the door of the present, derives its impact from sharply combining these two contrasting registers. It blurs physical properties with an inward and private psychological state, in a way that philosophical writing or psychology cannot legitimately do. Eliot, in fact, openly breaks Lewes's rule that "employ[ing] the terms of one class to designate the conceptions of the other is to frustrate the very purposes of language."<sup>105</sup> In fiction, however, which can enjoy its freedom from such rules and responsibilities, the effect is illuminating and instructive, not least because it enacts the idea that mind and body can be grasped as reversible metaphorical representations of one another—"the subjective and objective faces of the same thing," as Spencer argues.<sup>106</sup>

In Bain and Lewes, the attack on the old hierarchical conception of the nervous system has further radical consequences. Lewes quickly adopts a rhetoric of disorder as he depicts the influence of energy diffusion across mind and body. Its influence seems to tend in rebellious and disuniting directions: the system exists in a condition of hyperstimulation, multiplicity, fluctuation, "excessive complexity" and "chaos," he insists.<sup>107</sup> Bain pursues the point further, doubting like Hume the reality of a coherently organised, monadic self behind those animations:

The proper meaning of self can be nothing more than my corporeal existence, coupled with my sensations, thoughts, emotions, and volitions, supposing the classification exhaustive, and the sum of these in the past, present and, future. Everything of the nature of a moving power belonging to this totality is a part of self. The action of the lungs, the movements of the heart, are self-determined; and when I go to the fire to get warm, lie down under fatigue,

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<sup>105</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, p. 343.

<sup>106</sup> Spencer, it should be noted, adds that the 'real' nature of their connection, beneath the descriptive level of the double-aspect theory, is unknown: "we remain utterly incapable of seeing, even imagining, how the two are related." Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, I, p. 140.

<sup>107</sup> Lewes, *The Problems of Life and Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, p. 304.

ascend a height for the sake of a prospect, the actions are as much self-determined as it is possible for actions to be. I am not able to concede the existence of an inscrutable entity in the depths of one's being, to which the name *I* is to be distinctively applied, and not consisting of any bodily organ or function, or any one mental phenomenon that can be specified. We might as well talk of a mineral as different from the sum of all its assignable properties.<sup>108</sup>

The evidence of physiology thus assists in Bain's ontological deconstruction of the self. There is no stable or permanent essence to which 'self' refers. Rather it is an effect of the functioning of an increasingly complex associational network of energy. The empiricist self, conceived always in relation to embodiment and materiality, thus remains for Bain unfinished and in process. As well as having close parallels with the argument of Spinoza's *Ethics*, the notion of the self as an open-ended system of energy distribution also aligns Bain remarkably with an emerging area in cognitive studies today known as connectionism.<sup>109</sup> Like present-day connectionists, Bain challenges the traditional inviolability of the category of the human subject by using the nervous system as a model for understanding consciousness. For both, the principle of systemic diffusion is key to grasping the unfolding patterns of cognitive experience.

Bain's achievement, we might therefore conclude, includes perceiving a profoundly important connection between the structure of the nervous body and the structure of knowledge. Physiology and epistemology come together crucially in his two major works. On the one hand, the possibility of knowledge begins in his narrative of human development with a primary physical contact between our bodies and the external world, an encounter allowing for the most basic experience

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<sup>108</sup> Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, p. 509.

<sup>109</sup> "Connectionism... does not construe cognition as involving symbolic manipulation. It offers a radically different conception of the basic processing system of the mind-brain, one inspired by our knowledge of the nervous system. The basic idea is that there is a network of elementary *units* or nodes, each of which has some degree of activation. The units are *connected* to each other so that active units excite or inhibit other units. The network is a *dynamical* system which, once supplied with initial input, spreads excitements and inhibitions among its units." William Bechtel and Adele Abrahamsen, *Connectionism and the Mind: Parallel Processing, Dynamics and Evolution in Networks*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002, pp. 1-2.

of differentiation between self and world. He recognises that all knowledge begins from a body in which such environmental or sensory change can be registered. Without bodies, there can be no possibility of minds. As Bain puts it: "Our consciousness in this life is an *embodied* consciousness."<sup>110</sup> Secondly, and following on from this point, Bain's writing formulates a notion of what we might call the knowing body, which is to say, a body inscribed upon and altered in the course of its worldly experience. The act of knowing changes and transforms the subject of knowledge, and this transformation occurs not merely to the pathways of the brain, for example, but to the entire bodily system. It engages the nervous structure linked across the whole body. Knowledge, in the form of memory, say, is not simply held in a specific location, as the spatial metaphor of a storage tank would suggest, but rather in effect diffused across the mind-body complex. And this knowing body exists in a state of perpetual excitement and activation.

The Spinozan double-aspect argument at the heart of Bain's theory (and also detectable in writers like Lewes and Eliot) presents, then, more than a just challenge to the traditional ontological division of mind and body. By framing mind and body as mutual re-descriptions of one another, his work develops a dynamic and relational epistemology, one shaping the associational form of his writing. This commitment, of course, generates new problems in turn. For if we do not really occupy our bodies, but rather indeed *are* them, then how do we go about reliably acquiring a knowledge of the world that might be verifiable from a position outside them? If we know only by virtue of our embodiment, as Bain argues, then what is to be said of the traditional aspiration in Western philosophy to leave behind one's position in order to gain a more truthful vantage point? The question of how empiricism negotiated these difficulties in the mid-nineteenth century becomes the topic of the last chapter.

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<sup>110</sup> Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, p. 436.

## Chapter Five

# **‘To Think is to Condition’: Herbert Spencer and the Negotiation of Relativism**

Over the preceding chapters we have been tracing the development of writing in the British empiricist tradition during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, and its central preoccupation with questions surrounding the possibility of knowledge. All of the texts discussed so far, including the fictional works of George Eliot, could be said to force to the surface an acute epistemological self-consciousness in order to fulfil their particular narrative goals, or, we might say, as a condition of their own narrative possibility. They are, consequently, richly varied stories of knowledge. In turn, narrative imposes its own constraints upon the epistemology with which they are so centrally concerned. Unavoidably, philosophical ideas require narrative to body them forth. That is, they have to find their embodiment, or what could be called their specific mode of happening, in narrative language. In Alexander Bain, for example, the narrative journey into knowledge is one of precarious accumulation; in Ruskin, it forms a story of haphazard progress and fraught autobiographical engagement. Narrative thus gives shape to empiricism's sceptical impulse, its epistemological ventures always arriving in the form of a specific linguistic occasion, as George Levine has argued.<sup>1</sup>

While we have been tracing these important ways in which epistemology organises and inflects each writer's different intellectual project, cutting across

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<sup>1</sup> George Levine, *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England*. London: University of Chicago Press, 2002, pp. 1-43.

aesthetics, psychology, criticism, physiology, imaginative literature, and so on, the direction of analysis has moved inwards, as it were, towards the knowing subject. The concern with Ruskin pivoted on the truthful representation of the external world and knowledge of the natural and the real; the two subsequent chapters shifted attention, firstly, to the theory of perception and its associated psychological issues, and then to the consideration of individual embodiment and to the body as a site of epistemological uncertainty as well as facilitation. In advancing closer to the psychic and material site of knowledge, the concern with concrete reality has diminished—or, at least, it has become more problematic in the course of the journey. What we have been describing is a tension between interiority and exteriority, one that is crucial to the epistemological structure of empiricism itself. To the genuine empiricist, the insideness of our view of objects cannot be anything other than fully bound up with the outsideness of reality; and the opposite is also true: ‘consciousness’ refers to more than a purely inward state or condition. As Bain argues: “the object, or extended world, is inseparable from our cognitive faculties; so that a word that expresses every conscious state whatever is wider than mind, strictly so called; it comprises both matter and mind.”<sup>2</sup> The senses allow us the chance to encounter a realm beyond our selves, to be cognisant of a world, yet also limit and restrict what can be known of it.

Despite this, the mid-Victorian period is still often conceived to be “a culture increasingly obsessed with the real,” as one critic puts it.<sup>3</sup> Yet empiricist writers, such as Herbert Spencer, could remark of ultimate reality that “no logical account can be given”.<sup>4</sup> These two positions appear plainly at odds, one seeming to describe the irresistible lure of objectivity, the other pulling back from it. Of course, holding a view like Spencer’s does not automatically mean that one cannot at the

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Bain, *Logic*. (2 vols) London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1873, II, p. 277.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 233.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in William Henry Hudson, *Herbert Spencer*. London: Archibald Constable and Co., 1908, p. 16.



same time be obsessed with the real; indeed, knowing reality to be constantly out of reach might plausibly serve to pique the obsessive's interest in it all the more. Desire, after all, needs a missing object. But the crucial point here is that, in claiming that external reality lacks an objectively knowable structure, mid-Victorian empiricists like Spencer extended a line of thinking whose roots in radical scepticism continued to inform their approach to epistemology. Far from obsessing fetishistically over it, this tradition preferred more or less to bracket the real object in itself, concentrating its interest instead primarily on sequences of sensations and chains of ideas. This can be identified in part at least with a Humean legacy, strongly psychological and affiliated to associationism. And the upshot of this legacy is that, in the work of thinkers like Spencer, the obsession is not so much with 'the real' *per se*, but rather with asking how epistemology is both caught up in and dependent on the contingencies of personality and position, while also aspiring paradoxically towards an unobtainable perspective beyond the confines of perspective.

The subject of the present chapter, then, can be summed up by the word relativism. With reference to Spencer's work, and in particular the cornerstone of his synthetic project, *First Principles* (1862), we shall be concerned with how he marshals arguments which propose and defend a relative theory of knowledge, including what it might mean theoretically, as well as in practice, for a Victorian scientific thinker to viably construe the quest for truth as a process open to the destabilising energies of relativism. It should be clear by now that these were difficulties which impressed themselves urgently on the empiricist imagination in general, on Ruskin, Bain, G. H. Lewes and George Eliot alike, not just Spencer in particular. Eliot's early short story *The Lifted Veil* (1859) can be read as a macabre dramatisation of the necessity of relative knowledge, as will be explored later in the chapter. Elsewhere in her novels, narrators can be found making glancing references to the increasingly important doctrine of relativity, as it came to be

known after the Scottish philosopher Sir William Hamilton, as for example in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860): "In natural science, I have understood, there is nothing petty to the mind that has a large vision of relations, and to which every single object suggests a vast sum of conditions. It is surely the same with the observation of human life."<sup>5</sup> The idea that one unit of knowledge implies a wider structural context, a "large vision of relations," is a key tenet of relativist thinking in the period. Lewes argues similarly in *The Physiology of Common Life* (1859):

In the mighty web of things there are no threads more wonderful than Sensation and Thought; nor have any more constantly solicited the attention of philosophers, from the earliest dawn of speculative inquiry to the angry contests of today. They have been problems ever-alluring and ever-baffling: one moment the threads seemed to be within the easy grasp of an outstretched hand, only to vanish again into the inextricable confusion of tangled mystery.<sup>6</sup>

His "mighty web of things" gives metaphorical shape to Eliot's vision of relations. The point, however, remains the same. We grasp the meaning of a thing only by virtue of its position in some larger scheme, and its system of relationships with other things. Intriguingly, the 'things' Lewes is concerned with at this point in his argument are psychological in nature, sensations and thoughts—the very stuff of empiricism's associational, relativistic inner world. This tendency to figure non-material phenomena as having the quality of embodied things—to treat ideas in this way, as if objects abroad in the world—once again assists in deconstructing a basic metaphysical inside/outside opposition in a manner highly characteristic of empiricism. His rhetorical mode allows the passage to proceed, temporarily, as though these threads of sensation were unattached to a particular person's mind or a specific sense of interiority. It is notable, too, that a physical gesture—that of a

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<sup>5</sup> George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*. (1860) ed. A. S. Byatt, London: Penguin, 1985, p. 363.

<sup>6</sup> G. H. Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life*. (2 vols) London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1859, II, pp. 1-2.

flailing outstretched hand—tries (and fails) to connect with the thread. Where it all leads is literally unclear; the threads return in the end to their relational element, to the “inextricable confusion of tangled mystery,” a reminder that the mighty web of things may be considered a unity, but one too vast to comprehend. Things can indeed slip away before our eyes. The tone of doubt on which Lewes’s passage finishes signals the threat of incoherence and instability often thought to plague relativism as a philosophical enterprise. For Herbert Spencer, too, as we will see, such problems lend knowledge its distinctive grain and texture, if not an ethically significant note of provisionality.

### **Problems with Relatives**

Relativism is a notoriously problematic concept, and needs careful scrutiny. Few philosophical issues, after all, manage to arouse the same sense of confusion and controversy that typically accompany it. Perhaps a good way into it would be to reflect on why this should be the case. So far as epistemology is concerned, relativism of any kind implies rejecting all appeals to absolute or transcendental standards of verification. Principally, it argues that since the means by which we arrive at knowledge claims has no transcendently secure foundation, it must be accepted that what counts as true at a given time will be relative to some kind of evaluative framework, context or tradition. Even if there were some unchanging and timeless regime of truth hovering beyond experience, there would be no way of knowing from a sublunary vantage point whether or not our judgments and ideas corresponded to it. In its weaker forms, consequently, relativism appears dangerously unrestrained and irresponsible: once truth is relativised, all is permitted. Any truth might ultimately be as good as any other. Your view that blond-haired men are stronger and more naturally suited to exercising political power would be no more or less true, in the end, than my reasons for thinking that two plus two equals four. An extreme relativist would say that there are no

objective grounds on which to distinguish the validity of one judgement from the other, unriveted as they are to any concept of absolute truth. It was, in fact, an empiricist, J. S. Mill, who famously claimed that two plus two did *not* have to equal four; he argued that while it may be conventional to accept the truth of this equation, that does not in any way rule out the possibility that tomorrow, say, two plus two might equal five.

Mill, though, in general, was certainly not a relativist in the extreme sense, and few thinkers ever have been. “‘Relativism’ is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about *any* topic, is as good as every other,” Richard Rorty observes, “No one holds this view.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps so, but that may say more about Rorty’s bald definition of it rather than anything insightful about the nature or history of philosophy. As someone linked with a controversial turn in Anglo-American philosophy, Rorty has reasons for wishing to disown relativism; yet his own preference for seeing truth in functional terms, as tied in culturally specific ways to different communities of belief, arguably just brings him to a more epistemologically sophisticated version of it. The weak version he cites tends towards total subjectivism, where all my judgments and prejudices can prosper without the possibility of being shown to be untrue. It promises a kind of anarchic interplay between individuals confined to private, self-justifying worlds of truth. Rorty’s view, in contrast, envisages truth arising out of intersubjective consensus. “In short, my strategy for escaping the self-referential difficulties into which ‘the Relativist’ keeps getting himself is to move everything over from epistemology and metaphysics into cultural politics, from claims to knowledge and appeals to self-evidence to suggestions about what we should try.”<sup>8</sup> The force of his epistemology comes from its very resistance to epistemology as such; the analysis of how truth and knowledge operate should come to be viewed not as the special preserve of the

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Brighton : Harvester, 1982, p. 166.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 57.

philosopher but rather as manifestations and functions of culture. An important aspect of his shift away from a rhetoric of 'philosophy' towards one of cultural norms, vocabularies, conversational practices, socially justified belief, and so on, is the attempt to sidestep some of the logical traps traditionally sprung by relativist arguments in classical epistemology.

Even sophisticated forms of relativism like Rorty's, however, encounter serious problems. Chief among them is the charge of being self-refuting. As soon as the relativist speaks to announce their cause, inconsistency appears likely or inevitable. What is the epistemic status of the claim that truths are relative? Or that all knowledge is contingent upon culturally specific norms of knowledge-legitimation? Either relativism must concede that it, too, is subject to the same relativistic forces as those it privileges, or else it cannot avoid being charged with failing to exercise its arguments rigorously. The former case risks inviting its own irrelevance or dismissal, since by its own lights nothing would recommend relativism over and above any other possible way of proceeding. Yet the latter case would amount to a logically compromised form of exceptionalism, implying as it does recourse to an absolute claim—that is, the necessity of relativism—which contradicts the central thesis on which the relativist enterprise depends. As the philosopher Christopher Norris summarises: "To say that 'all truths are relative' (or other variations on this theme) is inherently to claim that relativism is in some sense *true*, or closer to the truth than competing ideas of how to get there... Relativism always has the last word, if only by effectively staging the debate so that nothing would *count* as a challenge to its own line of reasoning."<sup>9</sup>

The animated skirmishes between the likes of Rorty and Norris, and between other voices contesting a postmodernist crisis in the humanities at large, no doubt feed the perception that intellectual concern over relativism is a wholly

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Norris, *The Contest of Faculties: Philosophy and Theory After Deconstruction*. London: Methuen, 1985, pp. 193-95.

late-twentieth-century affair.<sup>10</sup> While it is certainly the case that the dominant trends in critical and cultural theory over the last thirty years have all ascribed to various forms of relativist analysis, and implicitly or otherwise held essentialism and objectivity to account, it would nevertheless be gravely shortsighted to link relativism exclusively with our contemporary moment. In his impressive study of nineteenth-century scientific writing, *Victorian Relativity* (2001), Christopher Herbert offers a salient reminder that “it is a mistake to suppose that the intellectual tradition defined by polyvalency, indeterminism, constructivism, difference, and the ideological critique of knowledge represents a radical initiative of our own day, prefigured by a few heroic pioneers like Saussure and Nietzsche.”<sup>11</sup> Yet critics regularly make these kinds of assumptions, Herbert says. Postmodernism, he argues, has more or less appropriated the connected ideas of relativism and relativity, effectively occluding an entire genealogy of those concepts from the classical era to the nineteenth century. It is as though theories of relativity in the twentieth century, such as Einstein’s in theoretical physics or Saussure’s in linguistics, just appeared *ex nihilo*, without any grounding in the culture and development of earlier ideas. As a result, a significant vein of thought running through the Victorian period has been overlooked, namely a tradition of relativist thinking which deserves to be understood as leading directly to our contemporary modes of intellectual scepticism. For Herbert, this trend becomes recognisably modern from about 1850 onwards, when major Victorian thinkers such as Mill, Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater all began acknowledging a ‘relative’ spirit in the intellectual life of the period.<sup>12</sup>

In the course of his argument, Herbert also reflects usefully on some of the reasons why relativity and relativism have the tendency to excite suspicion and

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<sup>10</sup> For a typically polemical account of the current state of critical theory, weighing up the losses and gains of the ‘cultural’ and linguistic turns, including the pervasiveness of relativistic and anti-essentialist schools of thought, see Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*. London: Allen Lane, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Herbert, *Victorian Relativity: Radical Thought and Scientific Discovery*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2001, p. xii.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert, *Victorian Relativity*, pp. 3-6.



condemnation. They attract a bad name for themselves, he argues, because, at least in part, the thesis of relative knowledge not only looks likely to enter into absurdity and incoherence of a philosophical kind, it makes a welcome guest of uncertainty in a way that may indicate irreverence and subversion, even moral depravity. It devilishly enjoys disrupting the stable and single. What is more, if relativism seems to allow truth—or Truth—to disappear, then its detractors tend to assume that goodness and virtue are necessarily also imperilled. For this reason, relativism represents “a forbidden trend of thought”; it is “the philosophy that dare not speak its name.”<sup>13</sup> It could be added, with regard to the nineteenth century specifically, that our contemporary perception of acceptable Victorian cultural values undoubtedly conspires in silencing relativity’s presence in the period. It is harder to reconcile relativist thinking with Victorianism when our popular images of the latter still trade heavily on its reputation for inflexible, austere and authoritarian cultural normativity.

For the purposes of our present argument, we might settle on an earlier date than Herbert to mark the beginnings of mainstream relativist thought: 1837, coincidentally the inaugural moment of the Victorian era itself, but also the year of an article by a young G. H. Lewes entitled “Hints Towards an Essay on the Sufferings of Truth.”<sup>14</sup> Published in the *Monthly Repository*, the essay makes a vigorous case for the merits of epistemological relativism. It will be worth dwelling on it briefly before progressing to Herbert Spencer’s writing. The article forms a response by Lewes to an earlier critical piece by Egerton Webbe in the same magazine. Webbe’s piece, a brusque polemic against mediated theories of truth, calls for a systematic and unified approach to knowledge in order that the threat of scepticism and haziness can be kept at bay. Philosophy, it protests, restricts inquiry too readily to the realm of appearances, merely following “truth’s footsteps in the

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<sup>13</sup> Herbert, *Victorian Relativity*, p. 31; p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> G. H. Lewes, “Hints Towards an Essay on the Sufferings of Truth,” *Monthly Repository* 12, 1837, pp. 311–319.

sand.”<sup>15</sup> Surprisingly perhaps, given his impatience with philosophy, Webbe’s starting points are not simply commonsense or intuition, and in fact he argues for the rigorous application of a scientific method wedded to universal principles: “We want a code of laws of universal application, not a mere string of local and peculiar regulations. We want a map of our moral world, showing where the sands lie, and the rocks, and where the deep water—a manual for all navigation in the perilous seas of discussion.”<sup>16</sup> The gist of the argument, carried by topographic and cartographic imagery, if not a bracing man-of-action spirit of adventure, valorises objectivity and heaps scorn on triflingly local or contingent aspects of knowledge. Its appetite for utility and efficiency will not tolerate faint-hearted relativism.

Lewes’s response to Webbe begins anecdotally, recalling that he, too, in his youth was convinced by the possibility of absolute truth. Patronising Webbe, he implies that experience, in due course, will similarly correct him: “It may be a mortifying feeling for the young student to experience after years of study—with their sleepless nights and the consequent ill health—that he has been pursuing a chimera in his search after truth... I felt this. I felt as ardent after truth as the young mind can, and after shaking off every prejudice, in the search, felt the conviction seize me of truth’s impenetrability.”<sup>17</sup> To appreciate the full effect of this, it must be recalled that at the time of publication Lewes was not yet twenty-one years old. Yet the ironic autobiography suits, of course, the relativistic spirit in which Lewes’s argument is conceived. The epigraph to the essay has already declared this: “Truth is the *cry* of *all*, and the *game* of *few*.”<sup>18</sup> The words belong to Bishop Berkeley, a writer who pushed empiricism to the point where it confronts its own latent tendency towards solipsism (and who, it should be remembered, became an increasingly important figure a generation after Lewes, for aestheticist and modernist literary culture, especially perspectivists like Pater and Joyce). Mirroring

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<sup>15</sup> Egerton Webbe, “On the Sufferings of Truth,” *Monthly Repository* 11, 1837, p. 116.

<sup>16</sup> Webbe, “On the Sufferings of Truth,” p. 117.

<sup>17</sup> Lewes, “Hints Towards an Essay on the Sufferings of Truth,” p. 312.

<sup>18</sup> Lewes, “Hints Towards an Essay on the Sufferings of Truth,” p. 311.

Lewes's allusion to the 'suffering' which accompanies the search for truth, Berkeley's sentiment equates knowledge with philosophical effort. It has parallels, too, with Ruskin's practice of linking truth and struggle at a formal level in *Modern Painters*, as discussed in chapter two.<sup>19</sup>

As it goes on, Lewes's essay works its way through different features of the problem, taking in phenomenalist theory, the mediation of the intellect, our acculturated love of truth, and the degrees of attainable knowledge. He asks rhetorically if truth in an absolute sense is possible, and an instant reply in the negative duly serves to introduce the theme of relativism:

We arrive at the conclusion that we can never know but relative truth, our only medium of knowledge being the senses, and this medium, with regard to all without us, being forever a false one; but being true to us, we may put confidence in it relatively. If then we can but attain relative truth, it follows that truth for us, can never be more than opinion, and our inquiries must be turned from the abstract question of truth to that of opinion.<sup>20</sup>

There are a number of aspects to the essay's relativist thesis. The first, indicated here, centres on our habitual dependency upon the mediation of the senses, which falsify and deceive. Like Ruskin, he agrees that the redness of a red rose is a relative, not absolute, property of the object, only meaningful by virtue of its relation to an observer. Colour does not inhere in things. Secondly, the fact that we are situated in one way or another prevents us from ever achieving a God's eye view of the world, or as Thomas Nagel calls it the view from nowhere, where our human point view could be left behind for some ideally panoramic perspective. As Lewes argues, "we cannot rise to that point as to survey the entire field of truth at one

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<sup>19</sup> For example, from the fifth volume: "These oscillations of temper, and progressions of discovery, extending over a period of seventeen years, ought not to diminish the reader's confidence in the book. Let him be assured of this, that unless important changes are occurring in his opinions continually, all his life long, not one of those opinions can be on any questionable subject true. All true opinions are living, and show their life by being capable of nourishment; therefore of change." John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*. (39 vols) eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, London: George Allen, 1903-12, VII, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Lewes, "Hints Towards an Essay on the Sufferings of Truth", p. 314.

glance, but can only see a small part at a time.”<sup>21</sup> A third point, following from this, could be referred to as the spatio-temporal variability of truth. What counts as true at one moment, or for one cultural group, may not be true at all times or for every community. “Things may be true to us, and not be true,” he states, with remarkable boldness.<sup>22</sup> The unscientific beliefs of millions of people who lived before Galileo, Lewes suggests, should not be dismissed as being simply false, for example. By exercising historical humility it must be acknowledged that their judgments once had truthful content and consistency within their own conceptual frameworks, even if they no longer hold within ours.

If this sounds disarmingly similar to Rorty’s stance on cultural relativism, Lewes goes yet further. Just as Rorty doubts that “we have, deep down inside us, a criterion for telling whether we are in touch with reality or not, [or] when we are in the Truth,” so Lewes argues that our partiality denies us the comfort of knowing when we have arrived at a baseline or bedrock of certainty.<sup>23</sup> “[Truth] is not cognizable for us,” he insists, “since we have no standard by which to judge it. Universal consent will not suffice, because there may be universal error... We cannot know truth, and could not know that we knew it, if we did.”<sup>24</sup> Being relatively positioned means foreclosing the possibility of any Cartesian heroism, where sheer ratiocinative force alone could guarantee the delivery of self-evident universal truth. Again, this sounds strikingly like Rorty’s anti-foundational claim in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982): “There is no method for knowing when one has reached the truth, or when one is closer to it than before.”<sup>25</sup>

Critics of Lewes, such as Thornton Hunt, responded to his essay with the combination of outrage, horror and indignation often reserved for relativism. For Hunt, his position was dangerously irrational, annihilating truth and delighting in

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<sup>21</sup> Lewes, “Hints Towards an Essay on the Sufferings of Truth”, pp. 313-14.

<sup>22</sup> Lewes, “Hints Towards an Essay on the Sufferings of Truth”, p. 312.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Brighton: Harvester, 1982, p. xxxvii.

<sup>24</sup> Lewes, “Hints Towards an Essay on the Sufferings of Truth”, pp. 313-14.

<sup>25</sup> Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 166.

chaos. Replying with an essay of his own, Hunt said that Lewes lent truth “a fleeting, doubtful existence, dependent upon frail mortality, instead of being a condition of Immortality.”<sup>26</sup> But the appeal to metaphysical categories, such as the condition of immortality, is just what Lewes’s argument will not allow. In fact, in opening epistemology to contingency and historicity, Lewes states in a moment of considerable daring that human beings are inveterate fiction-makers, storytellers, fabulists:

It may be a paradox, but I am convinced that the love of truth is acquired, and that of fiction natural. There is a tendency in the human mind to cheat itself with specious illusions—to idealize, abstract and personify—a tendency to the supernatural—to have recourse to hyperphysical agencies for the common physical operations—to leave the path of certainty for speculation.<sup>27</sup>

As human beings, we are disposed to invent and project in this way. To prevent error, Lewes implies, we must recognise narratives of metaphysical essences *as* narratives—as stories of knowledge, not necessity or immutable facts.

The critic Rosemary Ashton interprets the “Sufferings of Truth” essay, along with a series of his critical pieces in the *National Magazine and Monthly Critic* in 1838, as a sign of Lewes’s interest in German, and specifically Kantian, ideas.<sup>28</sup> Yet, as even Ashton herself seems to concede, Lewes was too committed an empiricist to easily swallow the idealist premises of Hegel, Fichte, Schelling or Kant, however much respect he acquired for them while preparing his history of philosophy. The source of his ideas in the essay is not to be found in idealism. (We might recall at this point that Lewes and George Eliot were happy exploiting their acquaintance with German philosophy for comical ends, as for example in Eliot’s caustic essay on women’s middlebrow fiction: “Lady novelists, it appears, can see something else

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<sup>26</sup> Thornton Leigh Hunt, “On the Alleged Sufferings of Truth,” *Monthly Repository* 12, 1837, p. 409.

<sup>27</sup> Lewes, “Hints Towards an Essay on the Sufferings of Truth”, p. 314.

<sup>28</sup> Rosemary Ashton, *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought 1800-1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp. 126-30.

besides matter; they are not limited to phenomena, but can relieve their eyesight by occasional glimpses of the *noumenon*.”<sup>29</sup>) The more significant point is that, as Christopher Herbert would agree, Lewes’s striking recommendation of relativism corresponds to a growing body of ideas in British intellectual culture centring on the concept of relativity which took hold during the mid-century, and empiricism was peculiarly open to them.

Following Herbert, it is possible to identify two important strands of this developing body of ideas. The first, as Lewes’s essay has begun to reveal, is its commitment to scepticism, which entails a critique of scientific objectivity. Its second important strand is the relational, or structural, quality of its mode of understanding. “All things, in order to have identities of their own,” Herbert comments, “are enmeshed in a perpetual traffic of communication with other things (which is one reason why relativity theorists from an early stage emphasized the symbolic—the differential—character of reality).”<sup>30</sup> This deserves the name *relativity*, a specific mode of relativism. We have come across it already, in Eliot’s fiction, for example, and in Ruskin’s theory of realism. In *Modern Painters*, he argues that the chief failing in the “modern pathetic school of painting” rests precisely on its tendency to isolate visual details rather than grasping reality formally as a series of relationships: “it is to be remembered that the great composers, not less deep in feeling, are in the fixed habit of regarding as much the relations and positions, as the separate nature, of things.”<sup>31</sup>

Victorian theories of relativity, Herbert says, therefore carry a paradoxical sense that knowledge proliferates and threatens unity, while simultaneously binding all of its elements together under a common structure. It is both one and many at the same time. An unresolvable tension between unity and abundance lives at the heart of the theory: “Relativity [for the mid-Victorians] means that all

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<sup>29</sup> George Eliot, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” (1856) in George Eliot, *Selected Critical Writings*. ed. Rosemary Ashton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 305.

<sup>30</sup> Herbert, *Victorian Relativity*, p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VII, pp. 233–34.



things are rigorously bound up together in a single indivisible world; it means also that this world is not one after all, but uncontrollably multiple.”<sup>32</sup> The differential, the shifting, the dynamic: such are relativity’s recognisable motifs. We will turn now to Spencer’s writing to see how this determining tension plays a role in his treatment of epistemological concerns.

### **Spencer’s *First Principles* and the Relativity of Knowledge**

The relativity of knowledge is fundamental to the whole spirit and conception of Spencer’s *First Principles* (1862). This work does a significant amount of fairly abstract philosophical labour to clear the ground in preparation for his vast, monumental, multi-volume, ‘synthetic’ systematisation of knowledge—a task of Casaubon-like ambition and scale, integrating scientific, political and moral thought according to the evolutionary view of development. If not quite the Key to All Mythologies, the *Synthetic Philosophy* (1860-93) stretches to a daunting ten volumes and similarly bears the impress of its author’s obsessive intellect. Underpinning this immense undertaking, which one twentieth-century critic has described as a “great extinct monster of philosophical learning,” is the following relativist argument:<sup>33</sup>

Every thought involves a whole system of thoughts and ceases to exist if severed from its various correlatives. As we cannot isolate a single organ of a living body, and deal with it as though it had a life independent of the rest; so, from the organized structure of our cognitions, we cannot cut one out, and proceed as if it had survived the separation.<sup>34</sup>

All thinking is relational, never absolute: this conviction forms the basis of *First Principles* and, by extension, the voluminous synthesis of knowledge it prefaces.

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<sup>32</sup> Herbert, *Victorian Relativity*, p. 50.

<sup>33</sup> Peter B. Medawar, “Hebert Spencer and the Law of General Evolution” in *The Art of the Soluble*. London: Methuen, 1967, p. 39.

<sup>34</sup> Herbert Spencer, *First Principles*. (1862) London: Williams and Norgate, 6<sup>th</sup> edn., 1904, p. 106.

*First Principles*, indeed, gives us a flavour of the style and direction of Spencer's thinking on this grander scale, and its starting point is the recognition of the constitutive role played by relativity in the synthetic project. "To think is to condition; and conditional limitation is the fundamental law of the possibility of thought," he argues.<sup>35</sup> The argument will be crucial, as we shall see.

A tension emerges at the outset, however, in *First Principles*, between the implicitly destabilising effects of relativism and Spencer's aim of constructing the solid foundations of a unified system of thought. The prospect of a towering edifice of knowledge feels too secure, too confidently factual and necessary—and too coldly impersonal—to be compatible with the forces of relativism. It appears to speak, symbolically, of absolute certainty, whereas relativist thinking critically undermines fixed categories and identities. The name of the volume, too, conveys this impression: *First Principles* is, after all, only a whisker away from 'first philosophy' and sounds similarly austere and self-legitimizing, first philosophy being—as Jonathan Dancy defines it—"a philosophical system which stands apart from, is independently justifiable, and adjudicates on the claims of the special sciences such as physics or, more mundanely, of sense-perception."<sup>36</sup> Like of all of Spencer's other writings, *First Principles* can therefore feel as though it was conceived in a mood of earnest epistemological confidence, akin perhaps to the proud iron structures of Victorian civic engineering.<sup>37</sup>

This aspect of his work has shaped his reputation in decisive ways. Today, if we have heard of Spencer at all, it is likely that his name will conjure an image of constipated Victorian positivism. L. S. Hearnshaw's assessment of his legacy is typical in this respect: "Spencer's pretentious system-building has quite gone out of fashion. His vast scheme of synthetic philosophy was founded on the scientific

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<sup>35</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 55.

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Dancy, *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985, p. 233.

<sup>37</sup> The comparison is not entirely unjustified or facetious: Spencer, in his younger days, had himself worked as a civil engineer on the development of the Midlands railway. For an account of Spencer's life, see David Duncan, *The Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer*. London: Methuen and Co., 1908.

ideas current in the 1840's and 1850's, on von Baer's developmental law, Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, and Mill's *Logic*. The superstructure was architectonic, and an expression of Spencer's obsessional love of system."<sup>38</sup> Written forty years ago, Hearnshaw's comment still applies today. Spencer's overarching mode of analysis and his expectation of coherence across different fields of enquiry mark him out as hopelessly antiquated. This is not without irony, given that currently in the humanities being 'interdisciplinary' is something to loudly boast about, a sign of methodological credibility. But Spencer may be unfashionable for other reasons, too, many of them political—his enthusiasm for evolutionary theory, for example, does little to recommend him on ideological grounds—and, above all, it seems likely that he has fallen from favour because his synthetic philosophy evidently wishes to erect the grandest of narratives, a unified story of knowledge, which most of our present literary and cultural theory cannot abide.

The view that Spencer's work tries naively to perform its analysis in a spirit of bold, if spurious, scientific objectivity is not new. John Dewey, writing soon after Spencer's death in 1904, observed: "It is this extraordinary objectivity of Spencer's work, this hitherto unheard of elimination of the individual and the subjective, which gives his philosophy its identity, which marks it off from other philosophic projects, and is the source at once of its power and of its 'inevitable weakness'."<sup>39</sup> System-building, in other words, diminishes or even eliminates individual perspective, or subjectivity, making Spencer's philosophy icily remote from personal interests or private feeling. As the title promises, *First Principles* does at times seem to possess an indifferent, almost inhuman quality—though, of course, that is not the same as having no point of view at all. For another critic, Nancy Paxton, Spencer's prose relentlessly minimises both the evidence of feeling and the narrative production of affect. She argues that he "rigorously excluded emotion—

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<sup>38</sup> L. S. Hearnshaw, *A Short History of British Psychology*. London: Methuen, 1964, p. 41.

<sup>39</sup> John Offer, *Herbert Spencer: Critical Assessments of Leading Sociologists*. (4 vols) London: Routledge, 2000, I, p. 33.

and indeed, nearly all playfulness, wit, nuance, metaphor, and allusion—and thus he chose a style that expressed his extraordinarily dogmatic and unquestioning belief in the self-evident and enduring fact of nature.”<sup>40</sup> She contends that for someone extolling an experience-based view, his work is curiously affectless. Like Dewey, Paxton identifies Spencer’s writing with the aspiration to suppress subjectivity as a means of establishing epistemological authority, resulting at a formal level in a strangely flat aesthetic. There is arguably more than a germ of truth in this; Spencer certainly argued that the truly philosophical self must repress its own emotional existence, and found that Carlyle failed as thinker because he “thought in a passion” rather than in the properly restrained manner of a philosopher.<sup>41</sup>

But, as Dewey realises, Spencer’s project sometimes feels like it is shot through with contradictory energies:

We have to reckon with the apparent paradox of Spencer’s rationalistic, deductive, systematic habit of mind over against all the traditions of English thought. How could one who thought himself the philosopher of experience *par excellence*, revive under the name of a ‘universal postulate,’ the fundamental conception of the formal rationalism of the Cartesian school, which even the philosophers whom Spencer despised as purely *a priori*, had found it necessary, under the attacks of Kant (whom Spencer to his last day regarded as a sort of belated supernaturalist), long since to abandon?<sup>42</sup>

Spencer perplexes Dewey: ironically, for a proponent of evolutionary theory, it is difficult to identify which species of thinker he belongs to. Is he a rationalist, or an English figure after all? If he rejects Kantianism, why does he effectively sneak in *a priori* forms of thought by the backdoor? One senses the same feeling lurking

<sup>40</sup> Nancy L. Paxton, *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer: Feminism, Evolutionism, and the Reconstruction of Gender*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> Carlyle, he said, dealt in intuitions rather than rationally coherent thought, which for Spencer was the hallmark of a philosophical mind: “It would take much seeking to find one whose intellect was perturbed by emotion in the same degree.” Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography*. (2 vols) London: Williams and Norgate, 1904, I, p. 381.

<sup>42</sup> Offer, *Herbert Spencer*, p. 35.

somewhere in George Eliot's comment that *First Principles* is "less barely intellectual [than his earlier work]—the considerations are larger."<sup>43</sup> Does this imply greater abstraction, or the opposite? Spencer knew that his work could be misconstrued philosophically; to him, it was one of the unfortunate, if perhaps inevitable, side-effects of his unusually vast itinerary. In his *Autobiography* he notes: "For though by some I am characterized as an *a priori* thinker, it will be manifest to any one who does not set out with an *a priori* concept of me, that my beliefs, when not suggested *a posteriori*, are habitually verified *a posteriori*."<sup>44</sup> We shall return to this point later when we examine his 'Universal Postulate', a term Spencer coins in a bid to resolve the problem and to put theoretical weight behind the claims of relativistic knowledge.

There is, then, a view—discernable now as well as in his own day—that Spencer's work of 'Synthetic Philosophy', including *First Principles*, asserts a dogmatic belief in positive knowledge, a kind of positivism that deals in brute facts and rational certainty. But Spencer was against positivism, at least as conceived by Comte and his followers. While scientific in outlook, and grandly synthetic, the positivist creed shaded into pseudo-religion and proposed a rigidly fixed narrative of human social development. In a letter to the *New Englander* magazine in 1863, Spencer stated that "from everything which distinguishes Comtism as a system, I dissent entirely."<sup>45</sup> An essay the following year, bluntly titled "Reasons for Dissenting from the Philosophy of M. Comte" (1864), outlines his unsympathetic feelings towards positivism.<sup>46</sup> One of the problems the essay acknowledges is that Comte has become so synonymous with 'Science' in general that whenever anyone

<sup>43</sup> George Eliot to Sara Hennell, 13<sup>th</sup> November 1860; see George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*. (9 vols) ed. Gordon S. Haight, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-1978, III, p. 358.

<sup>44</sup> Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography*. (2 vols) London: Williams and Northgate, 1904, I, p. 304.

<sup>45</sup> "On all... points that are distinctive of his philosophy, I differ from him. I deny his hierarchy of the Sciences. I regard his division of intellectual progress into three phases, theological, metaphysical and positive, as superficial. I reject utterly his religion of humanity. And his ideal of society I hold in detestation. Some of his minor views I accept; some of his incident remarks seem to me profound; but from everything which distinguishes Comtism as a system, I dissent entirely." See Duncan, *The Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer*, p. 113.

<sup>46</sup> Herbert Spencer, "Reasons for Dissenting from the Philosophy of M. Comte" (1864) in *Essays: Scientific, Political and Speculative*. (3 vols) London: Williams and Norgate, 1901, II, pp. 118-144.

invokes the methods of scientific thinking, or contemplates scientific ideas and concepts in a reasonably systematic way, it is often assumed automatically that they derive their conclusions from Comte's work or comply with the principles of positivism. Spencer's own intellectual reputation, he says, has been affected by this misattribution. Yet, he explains, while this association certainly exists, he does not consciously imagine himself as a disciple of Comte's system, nor has he ever subscribed to it; he can only be deemed a positivist in the sense that any scientifically-minded thinker has to carry that name.<sup>47</sup> What is more, while Comte's name continues to monopolise cultural views towards scientific enquiry, Spencer's own methodology is the more strictly empiricist:

All knowledge is from experience, holds M. Comte; and this I also hold—hold it, indeed, in a wider sense than M. Comte; since, not only do I believe that all the ideas acquired by individuals, and consequently all the ideas transmitted by past generations, are thus derived; but I also contend that the very faculties by which they are acquired, are the products of accumulated and organized experiences received by ancestral races of beings. But the doctrine that all knowledge is from experience, is not originated by M. Comte; nor is it claimed by him... And the elaboration and definite establishment of this doctrine, has been the special characteristic of the English school of Psychology. Nor am I aware that M. Comte, accepting this doctrine, has done anything to make it more certain, or give it greater definiteness.<sup>48</sup>

If we amend "English school of Psychology" to the more accurate "British"—not only because his peer Alexander Bain was an Aberdonian, but in order to signal the important descent of ideas channelled via the Scottish Enlightenment—then Spencer's point agreeably draws attention to the distance between his own residually sceptical tradition and the school of Comte. It gives a fascinating insight into Spencer's own intellectual self-image, as well as having the virtue of disentangling two often interchangeable terms, empiricism and positivism.

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<sup>47</sup> Spencer, "Reasons for Dissenting from the Philosophy of M. Comte," p. 120.

<sup>48</sup> Spencer, "Reasons for Dissenting from the Philosophy of M. Comte," p. 122.



Rather than positivist, *First Principles* alerts the reader at every turn to the ultimately fragile character of what can be known. The limits of knowledge, the borders of the knowable world, constitute its theme and everywhere inform its narrative pattern. Divided into two uneven parts, 'The Unknowable' and 'The Knowable', its design dramatically reproduces the differential structure behind every act of knowing. As in his epistemology, the knowable is seen to emerge out of the unknowable, its dark twin. The commitment which it formally enshrines is this: "that all things known to us are manifestations of the Unknowable."<sup>49</sup> The known issues forth, precariously and provisionally, from a fundamental, original and uncognisable condition beyond experience, consciousness, culture, history, scientific measurement and hypothesis. *First Principles* sets out this primary claim alongside a narrative of evolutionary development. Evolution, whether understood on Darwinian or Lamarckian lines, initiates a relational theory of its own, emphasising interdependence, transformation and instability. Its challenge to the idea of the self-sufficiency of meaning has close affinities with Spencer's doctrine of the relativity of knowledge, and we will look at it in more detail towards the end of the chapter.

The infinite, the unlimited, the unconditioned, are all similarly attempts to gesture towards an absolute (inconceivable though it is) outside all limitation or perspective, and these terms have wide currency in the mid-Victorian debates in which Spencer participates. It is illuminating that *First Principles* chooses to settle in particular, out of all these possibilities, on 'The Unknowable', thereby giving the concept a self-conscious epistemological inflection, as well as reining in any of its more metaphysical, supernatural or spiritual connotations. Spencer makes it clear, in other words, that his excursion into a realm of mystery stays within the imperatives of empiricism and does invite speculation over its ontological status, over what or who it might be. The point is not its tantalising inscrutability, as if it

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<sup>49</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 112.

were a narrative gap waiting to be filled by having its true identity revealed, but rather its very blank emptiness. The unknowable, for Spencer, resists incorporation into narrative; it is the “negative of the conceivable itself.”<sup>50</sup> It stands for an ultimate reality that we have no hope of approaching.

The relativity thesis appears midway through the first part of *First Principles*, after a kind of test run of relativist analysis regarding the conflicting interpretative languages of religion and science. In a patient and orderly way, he performs a conscientious deconstruction of the grounding propositions of each, using carefully sustained relativist reasoning. In the case of religion, he disproves the idea of a self-causing First Cause by showing that its conceivability implies the existence of another prior relation, extending the causal sequence beyond the supposedly fully self-present First Cause itself. Then he works a similar move in the case of science, demonstrating that its ultimate concepts and ideas, such as space and time, are infected by virtually identical problems of definition. In effect, Spencer shows that both religion and science, as explanatory frameworks aspiring to some final and exclusive truth about reality, arrive ultimately at the same point—that is, before the unknowable. Neither can describe the nature of the reality they predicate. Lewes, elsewhere, makes a similar argument, one that is relativist through and through, which helps to clarify Spencer’s mode of resistance to final causes: “Nothing exists in itself and for itself; everything in others and for others: *ex-ist-ens*—a standing out of relation. Hence the search after the *thing in itself* is chimerical: the thing being a group of relations, it is what these are.”<sup>51</sup>

Before crowning the example with his important point, Spencer briefly concludes: “Ultimate religious ideas and ultimate scientific ideas, alike turn out to be merely symbols of the actual, not cognitions of it.”<sup>52</sup> Here, then, in the fourth chapter of part one, entitled ‘The Relativity of All Knowledge’, he sets out the

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<sup>50</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 54.

<sup>51</sup> G. H. Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, *The Foundations of a Creed*. (2 vols) London: Trübner and Co., 1874, II, pp. 26-27.

<sup>52</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 50.

sceptical argument in favour of epistemological relativism.<sup>53</sup> Much of its detail is borrowed from Sir William Hamilton and H. L. Mansel, but the bigger picture of Spencer's theory launches it in a new, modern, empiricist direction. Broadly, the argument goes as follows. We cannot ever frame, conceive or represent—in our minds, in words, in narrative—that which is unlimited or of the 'Absolute'. Thought confines itself to a 'conditioned' state, and also necessarily supposes conditions. The mind cannot raise itself beyond its own limitation:

Thought cannot transcend consciousness; consciousness is only possible under the antithesis of a subject and object of thought, known only in correlation, and mutually limiting each other; while, independently of this, all that we know either of subject or object, either of mind or matter, is only a knowledge in each of the particular, of the plural, of the different, of the modified, of the phenomenal.<sup>54</sup>

The infinite cannot be an object of consciousness, finiteness being one of the mind's attributes. What we know, in an act of knowing, is always plural, since it follows that "a *thing*, in consciousness, is one thing out of many."<sup>55</sup> In this sense, the relativity argument identifies consciousness, as a possibility, with the very notion of relation itself, or relationality. That is, there cannot be consciousness without some mode of relation between subject and object; and they require each other for mutual definition. A subject is only constituted as such by the presence of an object, and vice versa. So it would contradict this logic if we were to say that consciousness can have an idea of the absolute:

It is thus manifest that, even if we could be conscious of the absolute, we could not possibly know that it is the absolute: and, as we can be conscious of an object as such, only by knowing it to be what it is, this is equivalent to an admission that we cannot be conscious of the absolute at all. As an object of

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<sup>53</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, pp. 50-72.

<sup>54</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 55.

<sup>55</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 56.

consciousness, every thing is necessarily relative; and what a thing may be out of consciousness no mode of consciousness can tell us.<sup>56</sup>

It all ends in mind-knotting circularity, with an attempt to conceive what an idea of the absolute would look like if it were not an object of consciousness; or, to put it another way, trying to imagine through the relative function of the mind a limitless object unconditioned by a subject. The very deployment of cognitive effort denies us access to the absolute, yet how else could it be figured? In short, “a thought involves *relation, difference, likeness*,” which are all antitheses of the absolute.<sup>57</sup> These relations of similarity and contrast are also, of course, the same basic modes of identification utilised by associationism as laws regulating mental life. Ideation begins as the recognition of difference, as Lewes argues: “With the feeling of difference or *otherness* arises the judgment of *not this*,” he says, “which in turn evolves the distinction of Self and Notsself. These two aspects are abstractions; in feeling they emerge simultaneously as correlations.”<sup>58</sup>

If the absolute ultimately transcends these differential and relative modes of consciousness and human point of view, Spencer’s theory leads the way to a comprehensive scepticism. Everything we know, he states, are manifestations of the unknowable, namely impressions and ideas.<sup>59</sup> The ways in which reality itself constrains them cannot be known in the relative sphere. Scientific knowledge, then, however formalised and rationally constructed it may be, has no way of securing its referential purchase on reality in its absolute configuration. As he establishes this point, Spencer realises that his thinking threatens to outpace his own synthetic project, by foreclosing the very possibility of scientific knowledge before it is even underway. What stops his theory from turning the real world into a dreamscape projected by one mind, a Berkeleyian solipsism? If absolute reality is unknowable,

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<sup>56</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 57.

<sup>57</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 60.

<sup>58</sup> Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, *The Foundations of a Creed*, II, p. 19.

<sup>59</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 112.

how can it even be named in language as the Absolute? Spencer's argument picks up at this point. He cleverly deploys the principle of relativity to ward off the solipsism that relativism seems to invite. We must, he says, be able to form the vaguest idea of the absolute, for it is implied logically by the concept of a relative sphere, which summons its opposite. By virtue of the principle of relativity itself, which states that the identity of things depends on a differential contrast with other things, there must exist something outside the phenomenal world, a *non-relative* world, against which it is defined. "It is impossible to conceive that our knowledge is a knowledge of Appearances only," Spencer argues, "without at the same time assuming a Reality of which they are appearance; for appearance without reality is unthinkable."<sup>60</sup> The relative is insufficient in itself, according to the logic of relativity, hence the absolute.

According to the law of relativity, knowledge can never transcend the limits of consciousness, but nevertheless it implies the existence of a real, independent, wholly objective world in the same way that a subject implies an object. By definition, the absolute remains unknowable, but we can possess positive knowledge of its unknowability. In fact, the knowability of the known world presupposes it. The significance of the theory rests on its view that meaning depends on the differential or relational interaction of the two. Alice Kaminsky has said of Lewes's theory of relativity that, "since every phenomenal manifold contains a subjective-objective construction, every context is relational; that is, a thing is its relationships."<sup>61</sup> The same can be said of Spencer's position. The negation of either relative or absolute is inconceivable: "The momentum of thought carries us beyond conditioned existence to unconditioned existence; and this persists in us as the body of a thought to which we can give no shape."<sup>62</sup> The paradoxical result of this theory, for Spencer and for mid-Victorian empiricists in general, is that contact

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<sup>60</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 65.

<sup>61</sup> Alice R. Kaminsky, *George Henry Lewes as Literary Critic*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1968, p. 20.

<sup>62</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 69.

with ‘reality’—with which, it is commonly said, they are obsessed—depends fundamentally on a condition of non-knowing, for it remains unreachable except as an ensemble of relations. The known must be shadowed perpetually in this way by the unknowable.

### **Telling the Difference**

*The Lifted Veil* (1859), George Eliot’s early short story about a man cursed with the ability to read other people’s thoughts, offers a peculiarly penetrating commentary on the concept of relativity. Often overlooked by critics, the story meditates darkly upon questions of knowledge, detachment, consciousness and narrative, all vital aspects of empiricism’s relational theory. Its use of a fictional premise as a means of engaging with these issues makes the story so compelling from a philosophical point of view that it would be acceptable to see *The Lifted Veil* principally as a story about epistemology. Lewes indeed praised it for being “of an imaginative philosophical kind, quite new and piquant”.<sup>63</sup> Eliot’s publisher John Blackwood hedged slightly when asked for his opinion, but also agreed it was “full of thought” and that it seemed to draw upon the knowledge of her scientific friends.<sup>64</sup> Full of thought it most certainly is: the story manages to compress an extraordinary range of philosophical ideas into a very small narrative space, among them (as the veil in its title suggests) that of the boundaries of perception and epistemological limitation. It will be useful to revisit the main plotline before taking up these ideas in more detail.

Taking the form of a fictional confession or autobiography, *The Lifted Veil* is narrated in the first-person by its gloomy hero, Latimer, a man affected by—and, in an important sense, also afflicted with—a special psychological power known as ‘prevision’. Prevision gives him access to the normally private content of other people’s minds, and intermittently also allows him to see accurately into the future

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<sup>63</sup> Eliot, *Letters*, III, p. 55.

<sup>64</sup> Eliot, *Letters*, III, p. 67.



by means of involuntary hallucinations. Sickly and sensitive as a child, Latimer discovers his special power in adolescence and interprets it at first as a creative gift, an assumption reflecting his dreamy and wan self-image; he has, he thinks, “the poet’s sensibility without his voice.”<sup>65</sup> In his first attack of prevision, which occurs while convalescing in Geneva, Latimer’s mind conjures a powerful vista of a city, Prague, which he is soon to visit with his father. The vision turns out to be vivid, but sinister and deathly, showing ranks of desireless city-dwellers trapped in a condition of perpetual repetition and monotony. Even so, it fills the aspiring (if wordless) poet with hope: “For several days I was in a state of excited expectation, watching for a recurrence of my new gift. I sent my thoughts ranging over my world of knowledge, in the hope that they would find some object which would send a reawakening vibration through my slumbering genius.”<sup>66</sup> The error of this interpretation is revealed after a second previsionsal experience, in which his father visits him accompanied by Mrs Filmore, a family friend, and a strange “pale, fatal-eyed” woman introduced as Bertha Grant.<sup>67</sup> A few moments after the prevision has stopped, all three really do enter Latimer’s room, making its clairvoyant property instantly obvious. But Latimer cannot pinpoint the cause of his abnormal experience, and wonders whether perhaps it is brief delirium, madness or disease. Furthermore, after the second prevision he suddenly begins to see directly into other minds, made aware of their hidden feelings and insecurities. In desperation, he resolves that his visit to Prague will form a kind of test case, confirming whether or not these repeated invasions into his ordinary rational life have any correspondence with future reality.

This “*jeu de melancolie*,” as Eliot called it, continues by compounding Latimer’s misery.<sup>68</sup> The strange woman, Bertha, becomes uniquely alluring for him,

<sup>65</sup> George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*. ed. Sally Shuttleworth, London: Penguin, 2001, p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> Eliot, *Lifted Veil*, p. 11.

<sup>67</sup> Eliot, *Lifted Veil*, p. 12.

<sup>68</sup> George Eliot described *The Lifted Veil* as such in a letter to John Blackwood in March 1859: “I have a slight story of an *outré* kind—not a *jeu d’esprit*, but a *jeu de melancolie*... I think nothing of it, but

only for the reason that hers turns out to be the one mind he cannot read. The very fact that her innermost thoughts are unavailable to his special faculty ensures that she becomes the focus of his obsessive love; but, sadly, she is also unavailable in the more literal sense of being engaged to Latimer's brother, Alfred. Nonetheless, he has a prevision in which he and Bertha are married, but she passionately despises him: "she was my wife, and we hated each other."<sup>69</sup> The visit to Prague duly confirms his worst fears: the hallucinations have literal and prophetic significance, and all of his visions will become real events in the way he has experienced them (including his own death, which he foresees painfully and vividly). This knowledge does not deter him from pursuing Bertha's love, for her enigmatic status is too overwhelmingly enchanting:

About Bertha I was always in a state of uncertainty: I could watch the expression of her face, and speculate on its meaning; I could ask for opinion with the real interest of ignorance; I could listen for her words, and watch for her smile with hope and fear: she had for me the fascination of an unravelled destiny.<sup>70</sup>

Following the accidental death of Alfred, they do indeed marry. However, once this has happened, disaster strikes for Latimer; her previously hidden mental life now becomes transparently accessible, not only destroying her unique attraction for him, but also revealing her to be selfish, cruel and manipulative: "The terrible moment of complete illumination had come to me... from that evening forth, through the sickening years which followed, I saw all round the room of this woman's soul—saw petty artifice and mere negation where I delighted to believe in coy sensibilities and in wit at war with latent feeling."<sup>71</sup> Their marriage eventually comes to an end with a macabre twist, when a medical reanimation experiment

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my private critic [Lewes] says it is very striking and original, and on the strength of that opinion, I mention it." Eliot, *Letters*, III, p. 41.

<sup>69</sup> Eliot, *Lifted Veil*, p. 20.

<sup>70</sup> Eliot, *Lifted Veil*, p. 15.

<sup>71</sup> Eliot, *Lifted Veil*, p. 32.

involving the transfusion of blood into a corpse is tried on a recently deceased servant. The dead body briefly comes back to life, only to reveal that Bertha has hatched a plan to murder Latimer using poison obtained by the servant herself. He flees, ending the story in solitude, recounting his life's events and awaiting a death which tragically he has already foresuffered.

In spite of its oddness, George Eliot stood by the story long after it was published. In 1873 she wrote to Blackwood: "There are many things in it which I would willingly say over again, and I shall never put them in another form."<sup>72</sup> For all its bleakness, it certainly should not be dismissed as an aberrant moment in her work. After all, Eliot's fiction rarely allows us to imagine human life thriving in unqualified happiness: Amos Barton's fortunes are memorably cheerless; the convivial joy of a community in the first part of *Adam Bede* is displaced later in that novel by considerable suffering, which ultimately leads to a consolatory and restrained form of happiness; and the concluding pages of *Middlemarch* provide a famously powerful sweep across a landscape of semi-fulfilment. What makes *The Lifted Veil* different, perhaps, apart from its formal uniqueness and its gothic departures from realism, is its apparently devastating annihilation of human sympathy. Eliot's novels are well known for developing a view of communities of feeling, where circles of moral sympathy radiate from individual acts, but on the face of it such an optimistic vision seems almost entirely absent in this story.

Yet, if anything, Latimer exhibits an excess of sympathy. If we consult the psychological theories of Eliot's peers, we find that their definitions of sympathy closely resemble a milder version of his condition. In *The Emotions and the Will*, for instance, Alexander Bain defines sympathy as "the tendency of one individual to fall in with the emotional or active states of others, these states being known through a certain medium of expression."<sup>73</sup> The prolonged misery endured by

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<sup>72</sup> Eliot, *Letters*, V, p. 380.

<sup>73</sup> Alexander Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1865, p. 172.

Latimer derives precisely from his tendency to fall in with the emotional states of others. People and voices rush in on him, unbidden and without warning. He is too susceptible to their feelings, his nature too impressible, to the extent that he experiences their emotional states as though they were his own: "my diseased participation in other people's consciousness continued to torment me; now it was my father, and now my brother, and now Mrs Filmore or her husband, and now our German courier, whose stream of thought rushed upon me like a ringing in the ears not to be got rid of."<sup>74</sup> In Latimer, it could be said, the sympathetic mechanism works in overdrive. Of course, the narrative tempts us to read prevision as an abnormality, frequently couching descriptions of it in medical or diagnostic terms. Variations of the phrase "superadded consciousness of the actual" are used several times to describe this excessive knowledge of other selves.<sup>75</sup> But it is interesting to note that such phrases turn up in Eliot's realist fiction, too. The narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* remarks, for example: "There is no hopelessness so sad as that of early youth, when the soul is made up of wants, and has no long memories, no superadded life in the life of others"<sup>76</sup> The regret expressed here is for Maggie Tulliver's lack of a 'superadded consciousness' of others, which can be translated as meaning a lack of sympathetic involvement with the texture of other people's experience, an inability to inhabit their perspectives and problems. In other words, the universes of Maggie and Latimer might be closer than we think.

To put it another way, and reading *The Lifted Veil* in light of Spencer's epistemology, we could say that Latimer's condition does not so much signal the abolition of human sympathy, as propose a world in which the usual imperatives of relativity have been suspended or removed. In doing so, it underscores the necessity of grasping the relativistic conditions which produce knowledge and regulate knowability. Lewes, in 1878, appears to have pointed out this dimension of

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<sup>74</sup> Eliot, *Lifted Veil*, p. 18.

<sup>75</sup> Eliot, *Lifted Veil*, p. 18.

<sup>76</sup> Eliot, *Mill on the Floss*, p. 320.

the story to Eliot and her friend Edith Simcox; according to Simcox's record of the conversation in her autobiography, he said of the main narrative conceit: "it is only an exaggeration of what happens—the one-sided knowing of things in relation to the self—not whole knowledge because 'tout comprendre est tout pardonner'."<sup>77</sup> And not whole knowledge, either, because, in the words of Bain, "Each man has the full and perfect knowledge of his own consciousness; but no living being can penetrate the consciousness of another."<sup>78</sup> Having prevision means, however, that Latimer *can* penetrate the walls of consciousness and overcome relational limitation—to his detriment.

One of the ironies of this situation is that, unlike famous overreachers in Western culture like Faust or Frankenstein, Latimer could not care less about the advantages usually associated with increased knowledge. His special powers are not gained as a result of clever scheming or bargaining; nor do they fulfil some goal established early on in the narrative, or satisfy some original burning wish, or realise a childhood dream. He does not use his powers for profit, financial or otherwise, despite the obvious edge they would give him if he happened to visit a bookmaker or play the markets.<sup>79</sup> His quest is not to know more. In this respect, *The Lifted Veil* does not take a place in that ancient narrative tradition in which the seeker of knowledge endures terrible punishment for flying too close to the sun. As pathetically self-absorbed as he is, Latimer cannot be accused of hubris. But Eliot's story dwells nevertheless on the idea that an excess of knowledge is symbolically fatal. If *Middlemarch* can be described as a novel about humans knowing too little, then *The Lifted Veil* is about them knowing too much.

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<sup>77</sup> Simcox records the conversation in her autobiography (17 March 1878): "I asked [Eliot and Lewes] about the Lifted Veil. Lewes said it came out in Blackwood without name soon after Adam Bede. He asked what I thought of it. I was embarrassed and said—as he did—that it was not at all like her other writings, wherefrom she differed..." See Eliot, *Letters*, IX, p. 220.

<sup>78</sup> Bain, *Emotions and the Will*, p. 28.

<sup>79</sup> For a Marxist interpretation of the link between scientific prediction and capitalist speculation see Terry Eagleton, "Power and Knowledge in 'The Lifted Veil'," *Literature and History* 9, 1983, pp. 52-61.

"Lack of objectivity in the description of the outer world," Georg Lukacs once said, "finds its complement in the reduction of reality to a nightmare."<sup>80</sup> Precisely the opposite of this befalls Latimer: *too much* objectivity gives reality the horrific sensation of a dream, or as he puts it, a "dizzy sense of unreality."<sup>81</sup> He sees, feels and knows too much of life; his sensory and intellectual experience is unbearably rich, agonisingly abundant. Part of the paradox of Latimer's fraught circumstance is that the pressures of prevision pull him simultaneously in two opposite directions: first, away of himself, beyond the ordinary limitations of selfhood, as he passes in and out of different consciousnesses and roves forwards and backwards in time; and also towards himself, pushing him into social and psychological isolation. The more intimate his knowledge of other people becomes, the more disconnected from outward life Latimer feels. His freedoms oddly imprison him. He achieves virtually the oldest aspiration of philosophy—that of climbing outside one's own mind—only for it to maroon him in agonising solitude, leaving him "longing to die, weary of incessant insight and foresight, without delusion and without hope," as he tells us at the very start of his narrative.<sup>82</sup> He ends up isolated from relationships in the human sense of the word, but also isolated increasingly from the very concept of relation itself. His suffering brings to mind a passage from Ruskin's *Modern Painters* warning of this psychological risk: "All the diseases of mind leading to fatalest ruin consist primarily in this isolation [from relationship]. They are the concentration of man upon himself, whether his heavenly interests or his worldly interests, matters not; it is the being *his own* interests which makes the regard of them so mortal."<sup>83</sup> Latimer *is* his condition, and it reduces reality to his blighted self.

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<sup>80</sup> Georg Lukacs, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. trans. John and Necke Mander, London: Merlin Press, 1962, p. 31.

<sup>81</sup> Eliot, *Lifted Veil*, p. 12.

<sup>82</sup> Eliot, *Lifted Veil*, p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VII, pp. 263.



He thus becomes a mockery of the epistemological ideal of detachment, a miserable version of omniscience. Trapped in a decrepit, sickly body, his quasi-transcendent mobility in time and space has a grotesque and parodic quality, inverting the traditional expectation that such gifts will ennoble and transform their bearer. Embodied in the human shape of Latimer, objectivity thus becomes a sickness. As Terry Eagleton says of Eliot's story: "Total omniscience keels over inexorably into solipsism. In a curious sense, if you knew everything you would know nothing, because subjectivity would inflate to such immense proportions that it would overwhelm and cancel its object, leaving nothing outside itself to know."<sup>84</sup> *The Lifted Veil* embraces just this kind of philosophical conundrum. It shows that little really distinguishes omniscience from enclosed subjectivism, which explains Latimer's simultaneous pull towards and away from the self. Prevision brings about a doomed sense of his own missing centre. His excessive knowledge almost entirely dissolves the primary differential intuition marking self from object; thus, in the story's fictional world, an undifferentiated sameness threatens to prevail over the logic of relativity theory.

The threshold it crosses is similar to the one Spencer inserts between the knowable and unknowable realms. Prevision has the function of allowing the veil to be lifted which screens off the unknowable, abolishing the relativism proper to human point of view. Therefore we could say that the story depicts Latimer journeying perilously, impossibly, towards (and eventually into) the inhuman element of the absolute and unconditioned. Only Bertha Grant represents a surviving link to a world where relativity still exists. Resistant to his mind-reading, she reminds Latimer of what it means not to be burdened by knowledge; she embodies "the blessed possibility of mystery, and doubt, and expectation."<sup>85</sup> Importantly, her appeal has everything to do with the play of differential forces. Latimer gives no indication of being drawn to any innate qualities in Bertha's

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<sup>84</sup> Eagleton, "Power and Knowledge in 'The Lifted Veil'," p. 52.

<sup>85</sup> Eliot, *Lifted Veil*, p. 31.

personality or appearance, no urgent sense of an *essential* attraction. She exudes, in any case, as the narrative seems to stress, a haughty disdain that ought to repel rather than attract him; and while there can be no accounting for tastes, surely her cold staring countenance and cruelly manipulative nature cannot explain why Bertha should be so sexually irresistible. The fact is that, for Latimer, her appeal rests not on anything connected intrinsically to her, but exclusively on the fact of her difference from everyone else. In this respect, her identity has a differential foundation. To be persuaded of this, we need only to recount how quickly love turns to loathing once her mind loses its resistance to prevision.

Insofar as Bertha stimulates in Latimer a longing to exist in a world where identities are differentially or relationally determined, she comes to stand in an important sense for the concept of difference itself. And Latimer's own way of comprehending his romantic obsession with the woman is to translate his personal failure into the terms of a public crisis, as if it were an epistemological problem for the whole culture:

Conceive the condition of the human if all propositions whatsoever were self-evident except one, which was to become self-evident at the close of a summer's day, but in the meantime might be the subject of question, of hypothesis, of debate. Art and philosophy, literature and science, would fasten like bees on that one proposition which had the honey of probability in it, and be the more eager because their enjoyment would end with sunset.<sup>86</sup>

Ironically, since at this point he is becoming increasingly locked into an isolated, self-referential world, Latimer eloquently defends Spencer's idea of the relativity of knowledge. Unknowability and doubt are its essential features. His speech also recalls Ruskin's insistence on mystery: "Knowledge is good, and light is good, yet man perished in seeking knowledge, and moths perish in seeking light; and if we, who are crushed before the moth, will not accept such mystery as is needful for us,

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<sup>86</sup> Eliot, *Lifted Veil*, p. 29.

we shall perish in like manner.”<sup>87</sup> This neatly captures Latimer’s destiny, of course: the elimination of mystery entails death. Latimer goes on to describe how we need “something hidden and uncertain for the maintenance of that doubt and hope and effort” which, in effect, confer meaning and identity upon the world, a remark wholly compatible with positing a Spencerian unknowable.<sup>88</sup>

Finally, Latimer is an example of what Peter Logan has called the “nervous narrator” of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction.<sup>89</sup> Logan’s category gives us a way of thinking about links between narrative and knowledge in *The Lifted Veil*, and for reflecting on the ways in which relativism becomes incorporated at a narrative level, specifically as a problem of language and event, narrating and knowing. Eliot’s story brilliantly exemplifies Logan’s thesis (if we overlook the gender of pronouns):

She [the nervous narrator] narrates her own sufferings, describing in the first person the events in the past that produced her nervous condition. It is a retelling of the narrative in the body; the narrator tells the story of how she acquired the body with a story to tell, of how she came into being as a narrator. This is also a self-canceling narrative, because the narrator’s authority to speak is compromised by the nervous disease that the story reveals.<sup>90</sup>

Latimer must let his condition speak; without his unusually sensitive disposition and mental powers, there would not be a narrative. Yet those same ‘nervous’ qualities also compromise his narrative authority. The relativity of teller to tale is central to the overall narrative effect, as well as being an aspect of its thematic engagement with the partiality of knowledge. Latimer, we know, will die, and thereby must arrest narrative progress. He announces in the very first lines the

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<sup>87</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, VI, p. 90.

<sup>88</sup> Eliot, *Lifted Veil*, p. 29.

<sup>89</sup> Peter Melville Logan, *Nerves and Narratives: A Cultural History of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century British Prose*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p.

<sup>90</sup> Peter Melville Logan, *Nerves and Narratives: A Cultural History of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century British Prose*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p. 29.

double closure of life and narrative that is to come: "The time of my end approaches... I shall not much longer groan under the wearisome burden of this earthly existence."<sup>91</sup> The final ellipses closing Latimer's narration, presumably to signify the pen dropping from the hand of its deceased author, stand in graphically for a death which marks the absolute convergence of the writer and the written. Paradoxically, owing to prevision, his inevitable death, which when it comes surpasses the narrative's own limits, has in a sense already happened.

It ushers in an eerie, aporetic silence: as it exceeds representation, his death brings the narrative back in a circular fashion to its prophetic opening, at which point Latimer struggled to find words adequate to his prevision of non-being: "Darkness—darkness—no pain—nothing but darkness: but I am passing on and on through the darkness: my thought stays in the darkness, but always with a sense of moving onward..."<sup>92</sup> What we are made to witness is a deferred narrative crisis, the attempt to figure in language a post-linguistic moment, which prevision serves to bring back inside the sphere of representation. The refusal of any stable ontological ground outside narrative means that the story cannot avoid approaching a perpetual solipsistic loop. It has its equivalent in the featureless darkness which Latimer begins describing, where all relations of difference have disappeared and differentiation cannot be recognised. Cancelling everything outside its own frame, the narrative can only turn in on itself meaninglessly, rather as Eagleton says is true of omniscient knowledge. In this way, we could argue, *The Lifted Veil* arrives at the abyss of the absolute, where narration ceases and Latimer, literally, can no longer *tell* the difference.

### **The Universal Postulate and Relative Ethics**

Eliot's story touches on a broader conviction in mid-century empiricist writing that the possibility of knowledge arises in perspectival, contingent conditions. When

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<sup>91</sup> Eliot, *Lifted Veil*, p. 3.

<sup>92</sup> Eliot, *Lifted Veil*, p. 4.

those conditions are compromised by the fictional and hypothetical device of prevision, catastrophe occurs. It dramatises a view similar to that described by the philosopher Thomas Nagel, who argues that "The way the world is includes appearances, and there is no single point of view from which they can all be fully grasped."<sup>93</sup> But Eliot's bleak parable of unconditioned knowledge also raises important questions. What counts as true, according to Spencer's epistemology, if there is no possibility of transcending our relative conditions? What, if anything, regulates or constrains the proliferation of relations which make up phenomenal reality? What is to be said of the ethical quality of differential experience?

In the first edition of his *Principles of Psychology* (1855), Spencer opens by asking: "Is it not then obvious that the first thing to be investigated is that mental act whereby we recognise the validity of our convictions?"<sup>94</sup> The question initiates an attempt made over the first sixty pages of Spencer's work to establish a foundational predication beneath all other knowledge, a "primary datum" or "Universal Postulate" that will validate inquiry. He quickly establishes that *belief* is "the ultimate fact which we can never transcend," for any kind of assertion rests on the prior assumption that the concept of belief exists.<sup>95</sup> It would count as logically inconsistent to deny the existence of belief, since any formulation of the denial would itself take the form of a conviction. Those beliefs that we invariably hold, Spencer continues, and whose negation it would be impossible to conceive, are those to which the name 'true' is given:

Mean what we may by the word truth, we have no choice but to hold that a belief which is proved by the inconceivableness of its negation to invariably exist, is true... We have no other guarantee for the existence of consciousness, of sensations, of personal existence; we have no other guarantee for any other axiom; we have no other guarantee for any step in a demonstration. Hence as

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<sup>93</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 26.

<sup>94</sup> Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*. London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1855, p. 11.

<sup>95</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, pp. 16-17.

being taken for granted in every act of the understanding, it must be regarded as the Universal Postulate.<sup>96</sup>

It is impossible for the mind to contemplate, for example, the non-existence of space. The idea of space cannot be annihilated; and so, the belief in the objective existence of space has the highest possible degree of reliability.<sup>97</sup> In essence, then, the Universal Postulate provides a practical test of a statement's validity: is it possible to conceive *not* believing it?

Spencer becomes edgily reticent around the word truth, but in effect his theory agrees wholeheartedly with Alexander Bain's view that the "supreme assumption that we can make is that *the uncontradicted is true*."<sup>98</sup> The Universal Postulate is explicitly a response to the implications of relativism, as Spencer indicates at the very beginning of the *Principles of Psychology*.<sup>99</sup> At the heart of the theory, as formulated by Bain as well as Spencer, lies the view that truth does not amount to a correspondence between idea and world, representation and reality, since the relativity of knowledge will not allow confirmation of such a correspondence to fall inside the circle of the knowable. Instead, the Universal Postulate judges the adequacy of a belief relative to the experiential situation in which it is articulated. Of course, the inconceivability of contradiction may vary over time, and therefore what counts as true is open to revision. A truth remains true until some occasion in the future which freshly contradicts it. Bain reminds us of Hobbes's dictum, "experience concludeth nothing universally," and he endorses it as "sound empiricism."<sup>100</sup> In his *Logic* (1870), Bain notes: "This is to apply the Universal Postulate, the primary assumption at the root of all knowledge beyond the present—that what has never been contradicted (after sufficient search) is to be

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<sup>96</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, p. 31.

<sup>97</sup> Spencer is careful to distance himself from Kant on the issue of space; like Kant, he agrees that it is impossible for us think of space (or time) not existing, but uses this to draw the opposite conclusion to Kant's subjective inference that space is a form of thought, namely, that it objectively exists. Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, pp. 57-58.

<sup>98</sup> Alexander Bain, "The Empiricist Position," *Mind* 14, 55, 1889, pp. 375-76.

<sup>99</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, p. 4.

<sup>100</sup> Bain, "The Empiricist Position," p. 376.



received as true.”<sup>101</sup> Like Spencer, Bain accepts this as the only proper inductive method for empiricism. “If, when the future becomes past, an exception arises,” he explains, “that case must be withdrawn from the sphere of uniformity, all else remaining.”<sup>102</sup>

Spencer’s framework for validating belief therefore feels, in this temporal respect, developmental and even Darwinian. In his study of Darwin, George Levine says of the narrative of evolutionary change: “Current conditions imply, in the Darwinian world, a long past narrative... Even when individual lives end, evolutionary narrative implies further, generational change.”<sup>103</sup> Something similar might be said of the concept of truth in Spencer’s epistemology. A truth descends through time struggling against the potential threat of contradiction and falsification—or extinction, as it were—at the hands of experience. The formalised systems of knowledge that we recognise as the sciences, for instance, are examples of evolutionary artifice, developed over cultural time:

The further we carry our analysis of things, the more manifest does it become, that divisions and classifications are essentially human inventions which have no absolute demarcations in nature corresponding to them, but are simply subjective—are scientific artifices by which we limit and arrange the matter under investigation, and so facilitate our thinking.<sup>104</sup>

The evolutionary claim central to Spencer’s thinking as a whole sees all phenomena moving from a state of homogeneity to increasing complexity and heterogeneity. This applies to human knowledge as it does to cellular growth or the evolution of species in the natural world. One effect of this fundamental evolutionary principle in Spencer’s philosophy, according to Kieran Egan, is that “we live in a dramatic

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<sup>101</sup> Alexander Bain, *Logic*. (2 vols) London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., p. 1873, II, p. 7.

<sup>102</sup> Bain, “The Empiricist Position,” p. 378.

<sup>103</sup> George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 47.

<sup>104</sup> Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*. London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1855, p. 353.

universe that is subject to constant change and that this change follows an invariable development from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous or, as he sometimes put it, from the simple to the complex.”<sup>105</sup> All truths exist in a state of turbulent evolutionary transition.

The Universal Postulate, then, operates as if it were an *a priori* condition, but in reality it posits an evolutionary scale that allows truths to pass from one generation to the next in a similar way to physical characteristics. It belongs to the realm of history, contingency and emergence, not necessity. Evolution, for Spencer, amounts to a kind of grand associationism, taking in the whole history of the human race, as if it were the development of a single mind.<sup>106</sup> The historical narrative linking primitive man, who lacked language or mathematics, with the genius of Shakespeare and Newton, implies the successive inheritance of knowledge down evolutionary time, so that the infants in each generation are born with a successively greater and richer bequest: “the brain represents an infinitude of experiences received during the evolution of life in general: the most uniform and frequent of which, have been successively bequeathed... and have thus slowly amounted to that high intelligence which lies latent in the brain of the infant.”<sup>107</sup> In this sense, the *tabula rasa*—that term so beloved by critics of empiricist psychology—shifts in Spencer’s theory from describing the state of the individual’s mind to that of the entire culture or race. Ideas are passed down to us as much as our genes. For Lewes, literature plays the same kind of role in evolutionary terms: “It stores up the accumulated experience of the race, connecting Past and Present into a conscious unity; and with this store it feeds successive generations, to be fed

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<sup>105</sup> Kieran Egan, *Getting it Wrong from the Beginning: Our Progressivist Inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey and Jean Piaget*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002, p 15.

<sup>106</sup> “The familiar doctrine of association here undergoes a great extension; for it is held that not only in the individual do ideas become connected when in experience the things producing them have repeatedly occurred together, but that such results of repeated occurrences accumulate in successions of individuals: the effects of associations are supposed to be transmitted as modifications of the nervous system.” Spencer, *An Autobiography*, I, p. 470.

<sup>107</sup> Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 583.

in turn by them.”<sup>108</sup> As this suggests, there is a strong narrative element to the theory, inherited associational patterns being equivalent to mental narratives passing from one generation to the next, adding to the long evolving structure of consciousness. For Spencer, this was crucial to defending his epistemology from the charge of idealism: “Implying the production of mind by natural evolution instead of by supernatural endowment, it is at variance with that conception of the universe with which the supernaturalism [of the Kantians] is bound up.”<sup>109</sup>

Spencer’s picture of evolutionary change—encompassing minds, culture, truth, knowledge, language—suggests a relativist world rather than one governed by fixity and certainty. Without question, it does not support a crude realism in philosophical terms, nor does the Universal Postulate instate an ahistoricity or a Kantian alternative to the empiricist and associational ground of his theory of knowledge. Instead, mutation, flux and transition are the defining qualities of Spencer’s relativised world. Even John Dewey, who earlier we saw reproaching Spencer for his unfeeling objectivity, acknowledged that Spencer’s writing stands excitingly on the cusp of a distinctively modern, relational theory: “But the transfer from the world of set external facts and of fixed ideal values to the world of free, mobile, self-developing, and self-organizing reality would be unthinkable and impossible were it not for the work of Spencer, which... served the purpose of a medium of transition from the fixed to the moving.”<sup>110</sup> The judgment is fair, if rather unexpected, and rightly points Spencer in the direction of late Victorian and early modernist tendencies in narrative and epistemological terms.

We may ask, finally, what happens, in this differential and unstable world imagined by empiricism, to the category of the ethical. First, as Bain argues, any notion of a transcendent ethical law, or transhistorical moral necessity, must be dispensed with in a world of relativity:

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<sup>108</sup> G. H. Lewes, *The Principles of Success in Literature*. ed. T. Sharper Knowlson, London: Walter Scott Ltd, p., p. 2.

<sup>109</sup> Herbert Spencer, “Our Space-Consciousness: A Reply,” *Mind* 15, 59, 1890, pp. 324.

<sup>110</sup> Offer, *Herbert Spencer*, pp. 41-42.

It is mere trifling to fill our imagination with an unseen, unproducible [i.e. transcendent] standard of morality; we need only look about us and read history, to get at the real authority that now maintains, and the one that originally prescribed, almost any moral precept now recognised as binding... The change that has come over men's sentiments on the subject of Slavery, would prove an interesting example of the growth of new moral feelings. Until less than two centuries ago, the abhorrence of the usage of holding human beings as slaves did not exist; and now, except in the Slave States of America, the repugnance to the practice has almost reached the height of a moral sentiment.<sup>111</sup>

The undeniable accuracy of his historical analysis—that cultures have historically adopted dramatically different ethical norms—probably does little to reassure us that Bain's relativism does not merely passively condone what it describes. Of course, his language is not without a moral register (slavery is “the abhorrence” of holding human beings in captivity) but it does not seem satisfactorily to imply an answer to the question of how we prevent a relative theory of knowledge from entering ethical freefall. If ethical knowledge is relative to our context, how do we condemn enslavement? Amanda Anderson points out in a discussion of J. S. Mill that he “construes the search for truth as a process utterly dependent on the capacity to comprehend and consider opposing points of view.”<sup>112</sup> This kind of position has an ethical as well as epistemological importance. Indeed, the two are bound up together. An openness to difference, to the very dynamic and feel of relative experience, arguably holds the key to an ethical dimension in writers like Spencer and Bain, too, who were heavily influenced by Mill. In Spencer, as we have been arguing, the concept of difference has a central significance; it is the principle driving his associational, evolutionary and philosophical theory. In Bain, too, difference and newness carry a primary value; as well as being vital to the stream of

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<sup>111</sup> Bain, *Emotions and the Will*, pp. 281-82.

<sup>112</sup> Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 16.

mental life in a structural sense, they are also types of psychological excitement, evidence of life and self almost akin to Barthesian *plaisir*: “Change of impression being the condition alike of feeling, and of knowledge or intellect, the pleasure of Novelty is mixed up with the acquisition of knowledge, and is hence called an intellectual pleasure... This pleasure is in fact the primitive charm of all sensation.”<sup>113</sup> Subjectivity experiences its own existence in terms of difference.

To substantiate the ethical possibilities of relativity theory, we might turn to an example from George Eliot, who develops an extraordinary sensitivity in her fiction towards the question of the ethical and the relational, in ways only possible within fictional writing. According to K. K. Collins, George Eliot’s view is that “fulfilling one’s duty, even in a relativistic universe, is unconditionally and absolutely necessary for the moral life.”<sup>114</sup> Collins, however, while acknowledging the relativity of Eliot’s mid-Victorian empiricist vision, still seems to fall back on the Leavisian celebration of her work’s intuited universal wisdom and consoling moral truth. (The ring of “unconditionally” and “absolute” transport Eliot to a world quite unlike Spencer’s, where such categories have only an indirect bearing on what can be known.) The negotiation of the ethical in a world of relativism does not allow for such certainties, but rather encourages Anderson’s idea of refracting experience through different points of view. Eliot’s fiction seems to engage with precisely this kind of problematic. Take this passage from *The Mill on the Floss*, for example:

[Tom Tulliver] couldn’t bear to think of himself living on any other spot than this, where he knew the sound of every gate and door, and felt that the shape and colour of every roof and weather stain and broken hillock was good, because his growing senses had been fed on them. Our instructed vagrancy which has hardly time to linger by the hedgerows, but runs away early to the tropics and is at home with palms and banyans,—which is nourished on

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<sup>113</sup> Bain, *Emotions and the Will*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>114</sup> K. K. Collins, “G. H. Lewes Revised: George Eliot and the Moral Sense,” *Victorian Studies* 21, 4, 1978, p. 466.

books of travel and stretches the theatre of its imagination to the Zambesi—can hardly get a dim notion of what an old-fashioned man like Tulliver felt for this spot where all his memories centred and where life seemed like a familiar smooth-handled tool that the fingers clutch with loving ease.<sup>115</sup>

The limits of Tom's imagination parallel those of the community; his 'spot' of England defines him and in turn he embodies its provincial cultural values. Place and personal identity are linked intractably, in a way that marks him out for the reader's attention, and even our condescension. For he entertains little curiosity about life beyond his immediate sphere, and his contentment seems to eliminate thoughts that could threaten familiarity or speak of existing differently. A given span of houses, hillocks and hedgerows marks for Tom the boundary of the known world, a world whose supporting values and wisdom derive largely from its continuities with an inherited internal tradition. Even the intuition that home might belong elsewhere, on some other spot, brings him pain and an anxiety of incomprehension. His resistance to difference, it is implied, would make the idea of the Zambesi impossibly vexing, intolerably foreign.

His attitude brings together the ethical and the epistemological. In a sense, Tom's rootedness delivers an anti-epistemology: it denies the pressures exerted by the unknown on identity and knowledge, and does not admit any theoretical ground beneath its homely grasp of life. It fails, too, to recognise the characteristically modern hiatus between man and world, culture and nature, knower and known, since Tom finds himself aligned so symmetrically with his environment that he does not perceive these modes of differentiation. That is to say, the world has yet to become a problematic object of knowledge for him. However, the reader is encouraged to see how his certainties are shadowed by the idea of difference, in a way that demands ethical scrutiny. The question we are invited to ask is whether Tom's apparent security rests on, or potentially allows for,

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<sup>115</sup> Eliot, *Mill on the Floss*, p. 352.



exclusionary forms of cultural identity. If his evident resistance to difference means remaining closed to the legitimacy of thinking and doing things otherwise, presumably at some level this has to entail intolerance towards alternative frameworks of belief, systems of value, cultural practices, rituals, rites, social codes, and so on. In short, it presupposes a degree of opposition to the rules and truths of another tribe, however casual or incidental. One has to consider how this opposition might be framed ethically. For example, does the unimaginative parochialism of a man like Tom Tulliver begin at some point to turn into more active forms of intolerance towards the other, into resentment, hostility and hatred? Is there a darker underside to his familiar world of benevolence and love, belonging and kinship, which could potentially find its expression in regressive human action?

Just as we might be framing these thoughts, Eliot's passage works an ethical trick of its own. It tempts us cleverly into the kind of complacency perhaps all too typical of the supposedly enlightened mind, before alerting us to the differential axis upon which our own judgments and assumptions have probably been turning. On the face of it, the passage describes a tension which the reader should straightforwardly identify, between on the one hand Tom's insularity and on the other a vast and fascinating foreign world, symbolised by palms and banyans, which he shows no curiosity towards. Broadly speaking, it pitches the local against the expansive, the backward against the liberal and refined. Where, we might ask, is the reader positioned in this logic? Necessarily, it seems, on the side of expansiveness, refinement and forward-thinking, for we are virtually invited to scoff at Tom—as narrow, parochial, a relic of some cosier, ignorant, bygone time—and, in so doing, to relish our distance from his limited understanding. The narrator marks these differences in subtle ways, for example by insisting that the mind of the reader (cultured from consuming travel literature) will be unsatisfied if left lingering over, say, an English hedgerow and so will leap instead to

contemplate scenes on a much grander scale such as the Zambesi river. This view of course activates its own prejudices about cultural difference, not least the belief that other cultures exist in a knowable and exotic relation to the spectator. Like George Eliot, one does not need to have read all of Edward Said to appreciate that such prejudices form merely the reverse side of the same coin as Tom's narrow-mindedness.

Moreover, if we do side with the narrator by imagining ourselves in this superior way, the meaning of the passage suddenly begins to look increasingly contradictory. After all, we must recall that its wording casts Tom himself as a curiosity, a type, an exotic specimen, an outsider from our vantage point—a man so “old-fashioned” to us that he harbours views now alien to the implicitly enlightened readership. In this sense, the more significant differential axis here is the one which divides his set of values from ours, effectively ‘othering’ Tom. Yet if Tom is the passage's true other, surely the narrator's invitation to condescend to him must stand out as grossly inappropriate, as well as logically at odds with his or her apparent toleration of difference. Paradoxically, the narrator would find Tom more appealing if only he were a little more modern, in fact a little more like the narrator (and, supposedly, like the reader, too). But since it is precisely the longing for sameness and recognisability that the narrator finds so unpalatable, and seizes upon to patronise Tom, the basis of the narrator's ethical superiority quickly starts to look vulnerable. In a principled attempt to embrace cultural difference, he or she unwittingly displays a kind of historical intolerance towards the past. What Eliot captures, in effect, is the moment when this kind of liberal consciousness collides with its own partially hidden presuppositions and limitations. Indeed, one could say that the passage out-relativises her relativist narrator.

The complexity of these manoeuvrings and shifts captures some of the difficulties and advantages entailed by a differential ethical programme. It ties the question to knowledge to human interests, in a way that Spencer, for example, does

not perform in his own discussion of relativity. Eliot thus turns the claim that consciousness cannot be transcended into a powerful property of the fictional scene, into a hypothetical negotiation of relativism, transforming the relational theory of empiricism into an ethically reflective aesthetic experience.

## Conclusion

In her *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions* (1991), Cathy Caruth reflects on the reputation of empiricist philosophy:

Unlike the self-brooding Germans, said to account for every moment of their own speculations, the empiricists are deemed willing to give all the credit to the sensory world and to forget the necessarily active nature of their own thinking. English Romantic poetry, occasionally reading conjunction with the work of Germans such as Hegel, has always seemed to transcend this un-self-consciousness and make its own creative act a central focus.

There has always been, she goes on, a tendency to see empiricism “as an uncritical or non-speculative philosophical tradition.”<sup>1</sup> As her remarks suggest, empiricism has suffered from its comparison with Continental traditions of thought. Where German philosophy or French literary theory have appeared to combine obsessive reflexivity, technical rigour, and sheer mind-wrenching difficulty with a kind of tormented philosophical élan, British empiricism since Locke has acquired none of those advantageous stereotypes. Instead, its intellectual personality has come to revolve very much around its outmoded, buttoned-up stodginess. Above all, it is said to lack a genuinely critical moment—to resist the risks or devastations inherent in the truly philosophical enterprise.

This thesis has attempted to challenge this view. Engrained views are hard to unsettle, of course, and despite the valuable work of critics like Caruth herself, Jules David Law, George Levine and Christopher Herbert, it remains a reasonably novel proposition to want to read the empiricist tradition differently. Yet there are

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<sup>1</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions: Locke, Wordsworth, Kant, Freud*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, p. 3.

extremely good and rewarding reasons for doing so, not least the fact that in surprising ways the aspirations and register of empiricism as an intellectual position often initiate a scepticism which calls into doubt the very certainties it supposedly holds most dear. Among them we could count the concept of positive or objective knowledge and the transparency of perception. By looking at the development of ideas in empiricist narratives in the mid-Victorian period, the intention has been to draw attention to the ways in which the traditional scope of the epistemological problem leads empiricism to embrace a form of provisionality with regard to knowledge, mind, self and culture, which in current terminology would warrant giving it the name constructivism: “*Constructivism*, in most informed contemporary usage of the term, refers to a particular way of understanding the relation between what we call knowledge and what we experience as reality. In contrast to the understanding of that relation generally referred to as realism, constructivist accounts of cognition, science, truth and related matters conceive of the specific features of what we experience, think of, talk about as ‘the world’ (objects, entity boundaries, properties, categories, and so forth) not as independent of our sensory, perceptual, manipulative, and conceptual/discursive practices but, rather, as emerging from—or as it is said, ‘constructed by’—those practices themselves.”<sup>2</sup>

It should hopefully be clear by this point that the examination of writing by George Eliot, John Ruskin, G. H. Lewes, Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer has attempted to draw out important ways in which they anticipate and rigorously extend this kind of approach to the question of knowledge. As we have seen, the questions they excite frequently extend beyond the specialist domain of philosophy, both then and now—in the mid-Victorian context, and in our professionalised present era. For these writers, epistemology organises and inflects their different intellectual projects, in aesthetics, psychology, criticism, physiology, imaginative

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Hernstein Smith, “Reply to an Analytical Philosopher” in Kenneth Surin, ed. *The Vicissitudes of Theory*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, p. 232.

literature, and so on, without be obliged to identify necessarily with the discourse of philosophy. In this sense, we have been concerned less with a discernable philosophical position than a distinctive cultural formation or cultural language. And as such, empiricist writing in the period everywhere invokes the fraught issue of knowability. For “a culture increasingly obsessed with the real,” as one critic describes the mid-nineteenth century, it invested an immense effort demonstrating how that reality was beyond the reach of representation or positive knowledge.<sup>3</sup> The contingency of the self at the centre of empiricism—struggling for a position outside itself that it has no hope ever of occupying—epitomises its obsession with epistemological limitation. One of its most important consequences, then, is a sustained endorsement of relative knowledge, perhaps nowhere better or more vividly expressed than in these lines by Lewes: “Every Real is the complex of so many relations, a conjecture of so many events, a synthesis of so many sensations, that to know one Real thoroughly would only be possible through an intuition embracing the universe.”<sup>4</sup> In remarkable moments like this, mid-Victorian writing leaves behind its plodding stereotype, upending what Law calls the “popular conception of empiricism as a naively dogmatic, stone-kicking positivism, hostile at all points to rhetoric.”<sup>5</sup> It is in such narrative moments, we might say, that empiricism seems most acutely to register the difficulties of knowing, with the effect of calling into view the necessary impossibility of its own enterprise.

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 233.

<sup>4</sup> G. H. Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, *The Foundations of a Creed*. (2 vols) London: Trübner and Co., 1874, I, pp. 342-43.

<sup>5</sup> Jules David Law, *The Rhetoric of Empiricism: Language and Perception from Locke to I. A. Richards*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 12.



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